

ARIZONA CAPITOL TIMES

Joe Kanefield: A winding road from Republican to Democrat to Republican

October 10, 2016

CAP TIMES

Q&A

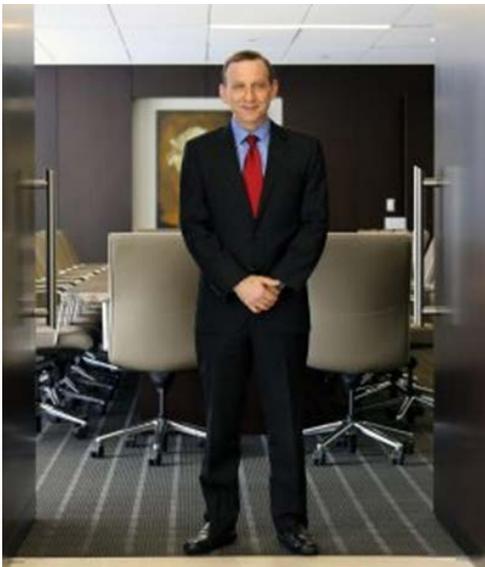
Joe Kanefield's career took a distinct turn when he went to work for then-Secretary of State Jan Brewer.

It was the impeachment of former Gov. Evan Mecham that first interested Kanefield in government. More than two decades later he, too, would find himself in the midst of divisive controversies at the Capitol, including Brewer's lawsuit against legislative leadership and the illegal immigration bill SB1070, which led him to Brewer's side as she debated with President Obama in the Oval Office.

After 16 years in the world of government, including five as Brewer's state elections director and several more as her general counsel in the Governor's Office, Kanefield moved on to the private sector, where he has become one of the most prominent attorneys in the world of Arizona government and politics.

You came to prominence working for Jan Brewer. How did you come to work for her at the Secretary of State's Office?

I was the election attorney for the state when she was elected. So she inherited me as a lawyer and I inherited her as a client. So that's when I first got to know her. I knew her before I actually met her because of, well, state politics, and she was – it was the Evan Mecham impeachment trial that really got me interested in politics when I was in college. And I remember her role as his state senator.



So it was the Mecham impeachment that first got you interested in government and politics?

I was a freshman at ASU and I was just fascinated by what was happening after Mecham became elected, because the State Press at ASU wrote daily about everything he was doing and had done and said. So as someone who wasn't really interested in politics up until that point in my life, I became very interested and concerned.

After being immersed in the impeachment and being hostile to Mecham, what was it like going to work for one of his biggest defenders at the Capitol?

Years later, after going back and reading and reviewing that period, I decided that I understood what he was accused of, but I've come to the conclusion that impeachment probably was not appropriate. So I give kudos to Governor Brewer, at the time, who was pointing things out that were probably very unpopular.

When you started working for Brewer, you were a Democrat, but later switched to Republican during your time with her. How did that come about?

I come from a split household. My father's a lifelong Republican and my mother is a lifelong Democrat. And her family, my grandfather was very active in Democratic politics in St. Louis, Missouri. So I started as a Republican when I first registered to vote in '86, and then went to law school and decided that I was more aligned with the Democratic view of life back then, switched. And then when I went into election administration and enforcement, I really dialed back my politics to maintain neutrality. In the late '90s, I was very nonpartisan because I just felt that was important, as both an assistant attorney general and a state elections director. So my party affiliation was a benefit in some respects. Because our elections are run by an elected, partisan secretary of state, to have a Democrat as the state elections director gave everyone some confidence that elections were being administered in a fair and neutral manner. Then when Governor Napolitano resigned to become secretary of Homeland Security and Brewer became governor . . . my party affiliation became more of an issue in the Governor's Office, where things are much more partisan than they are at the Secretary of State's Office. And by that point, I definitely was more aligned with the Republican way of thinking and I'd worked for Governor Brewer for several years. So it was an easy decision to switch in 2010. I've never regretted that decision and I'm happy to be a registered Republican.

I'm sure there were some intense moments at the Secretary of State's Office, but probably nothing like the Governor's Office. What was it like being in the Brewer administration, especially during the days of SB1070?

That was probably two of the most intense years of my professional life. It was tremendous fun and an incredible opportunity. But I don't know if I would do it again. The Ninth Floor was much different than the Seventh Floor. Every day there is a serious issue that we're having to deal with, and you can never spend a lot of time on any one matter, even though every matter that presented itself at the Governor's Office was hugely important. Probably the most thrilling moment of my time as Governor Brewer's general counsel was when we met with President Obama to discuss Senate Bill 1070. And that was in June. That was shortly before the United States government filed its lawsuit, but it was clear they were considering it. So when the governor went to, she was in Washington, D.C., for another meeting, asked to meet with the president. Initially he said no. And then . . . the D.C. press started to hound the president – Governor Brewer's here, there's this big immigration question, shouldn't you meet with her? So he ends up finding 30 minutes' time to meet with her.

Before you made your name as a lawyer, it sounds like you had a promising career as a rock guitarist.

I spent nine years in a local rock band after I graduated from law school. We were called Blue Fur. We were originally called Joe Lies, but then ended up selling our band name to BMG Entertainment, who wanted the name for some reason. (Joe Lies) is a reference to a John Cusack movie from the '80s, "Say Anything." It wasn't about me. (Arizona Court of Appeals) Judge Peter Swann was in the band with me. We really had a great time. We pressed two CDs. One of them is still available on iTunes. I think I'm owed like 78 cents in royalties.

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