

**Kathy Ashe interviewed by Bob Short
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Reflections on Georgia Politics**

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BOB SHORT: I'm Bob Short. This is Reflections on Georgia Politics, sponsored by Young Harris College and the Richard Russell Library at the University of Georgia. Our guest today is Representative Kathy Ashe, an eighteen-year veteran of the Georgia General Assembly who represents I guess midtown Atlanta.

KATHY ASHE: Downtown Atlanta.

SHORT: Downtown. Welcome Kathy, we are delighted to have you.

ASHE: Glad to be here.

SHORT: Before we get into your legislative career, let's talk a little bit about Kathy Ashe.

ASHE: Kathy Ashe grew up in Tallahassee, Florida. I was actually born in Illinois. My parents were both university types and we moved to Florida State University when I was six. So Tallahassee was home. Perfect place for growing up, marvelous combination of state government on one and hand and universities on the other between FAMU and Florida State. Tallahassee was a very academic government town and so there were all sorts of opportunities that availed to themselves of kids growing up there because we just happened to be there. I never went to the university school but there was a great university school where many of my friends went to high school, and junior high, and elementary school. I went to the public system; loved it, walked to school, had great friends living in Betton Hills.

A father who was very involved in establishing the junior college system in the state of Florida, so he spent a good bit of time working directly with the governor's office and, toward the end of my high school, that was Governor Farris Bryant from Ocala. The interesting piece of trivia is that my father and Farris had been in the navy together and so they were very close personal friends in addition to this professional developing a junior college system. So that offered me any number of political opportunities because simultaneously my mother was president of the state PTA. And so they were both traveling a great deal and here was this high school kid left hanging, as I used to describe it, from a limb on one of the live oak trees in Tallahassee, and they

knew better than to let me stay home alone. So I often spent nights at the Governor's Mansion. Farris's daughter, Cecilia, was my age and I was really the only person she knew when they came to Tallahassee. So here is this new governor's daughter in this high school that was a little confusing socially, and we got to be good friends, and I'd spend the night at the Governor's Mansion when my parents were out of town. So over Cheerios, Farris Bryant made it real clear to me what a governor of a state did, how it worked, the kinds of decisions he was making. Parenthetically, nobody else in the Mansion ate breakfast so it was often the two of us scavenging around to find breakfast, almost always Cheerios. So government never seemed strange, so it's always been a part of who I am.

SHORT: You attended Agnes Scott.

ASHE: I did. I left Tallahassee because my parents were both convinced and I was convinced, an only child, that going away was a good idea. I attended some classes at Florida State when I was in high school still so it needed to be away from home, but not so far away from home. I came up here to Agnes Scott and I've never left Atlanta.

SHORT: You got a master's degree in education at Emory.

ASHE: Well, got to go back to Agnes Scott. Agnes Scott was an absolutely great place for me to go to college. It was a place where—well, I guess a little story helps. In high school, I made A's in physics. I made A's in physics because I could bake a chocolate cake and the physics teacher—this was in the 60s—the physics teacher really liked chocolate cakes. I happened to be the only girl in the class, and so my assignment really wasn't to learn physics but it was to provide a chocolate cake each of the semesters of the school year. So there was this little built-up frustration of what can a woman do academically and Agnes Scott provided that environment. I'm one of those folks who believes that every woman's education ought to include some single sex education. We have a great new Atlanta high school for girls in Atlanta. I think it really serves a purpose because if you're not the leader, if you're not the head of the class, if you're not involved in student government, whose going to do it? I think it works as well if it's an elementary school, a college, a high school. But that little bit of this game belongs to the women I think was very healthy and surely has some strong roots in my feminist perspective. So Agnes Scott was great. I took advantage of every opportunity Agnes Scott had except figuring out what I was going to do when I grew up. And so one night I called home and said, "What do I do? I'm about to have a degree and I don't have a clue about what I want to do after college. I think I might actually want to teach school." And both of my very education oriented parents, I think, went into a state of deep my goodness it would have been nice to do this a little sooner, but what do you do about that. So I went to Emory and got an MAT in elementary education and I've loved doing it.

SHORT: And then you taught.

ASHE: Then I taught, and taught several years. The first year I taught, I was down in Griffin and it was a fascinating experience because Emory had a number of MATs and they put them out for a full semester of teaching usually with a teacher in the classroom. But the Griffin- Spalding system needed somebody teaching seventh grade English and they had no teacher in the

classroom so I got to be that teacher. That was an interesting experience because three or four of us lived in an apartment in Griffin, actually a trailer in Griffin. It turned out that the people who lived there before us had been women of the night and so there was great excitement about midnight for the first few nights we were there when the door knocked and people expected us to provide some service that we were not interested in providing. But that experience in the classroom convinced me that it was the right path and that middle school, junior high in those days, was really where I wanted to be.

And so when I finished the degree and went to work, I went to work in Cobb County, with a truly gifted educator, a fellow by the name of Tom Mathis. And Tom, over the years, played many roles but he was the person who started the middle schools in Cobb and did it in a sort of controversial way. We had vast open space places where there was an English teacher, a math teacher, a science teacher, social studies, and this mob of kids, no walls. I actually loved it. There were lots of folks who found it very difficult and some kids who clearly found it difficult, that it didn't match their learning style, but I loved it. But it convinced me that what I really wanted to know how to do was help a student who had gotten all the way through that first part of school without really knowing how to read to learn. Some of them sort of read but they didn't really know how to take that written word and turn it something they could learn from. And so I went back to Georgia State, and did a good bit of work in early reading and how do you teach kids to read.

My favorite memories in the school system, and it was Cobb County the whole time, had to do with how do you help a kid unlock, mostly for himself in those days, the mystery that is the printed word. Sometimes that involved closing the door and teaching a kid how to crawl all over again. But I still keep up with some of those kids; that was a very meaningful experience. But in the meantime, I got married, still married to the same man. But got married and it was difficult when we had a child to figure out how to drive from downtown Atlanta out to Cobb County to teach and back and forth. And so Cobb County let me teach halftime. They got a good deal; there were two of us who split a job. It was probably the first job share in K-12 education in Georgia. They got a good deal; they got two of us, no benefits, and each of us worked three days a week. Did that until our second child, Sally, was born and then there was really just no way.

SHORT: At some point, you became a legislative assistant to a great, great state representative, Kil Townsend.

ASHE: We just lost Kiliaen; it's one of those that brings a tear to my eye thinking about him now. That actually came after a little bit. For a while, I really tried to stay home. I decided it was important to get involved in my children's education, get involved in what they were doing, and I loved it. Sally and Robbie, really fun good kids still to this day. But I wasn't very good at being home all the time. So I got involved in every league you could think of from the Junior League to the Urban League to the League of Women Voters, and spent a great deal of time out in the community. And it was probably—well it's the Junior League and the League of Women Voters that brought back all those memories of Tallahassee, and being a page, and working in the kitchen with Farris over Cheerios. And it seemed to me that there was something in that political arena.

In those days, the Junior League was working on trying to convince folks to put seatbelts and car restraints for children. And one of my favorite visits to the capitol as a league volunteer was to

meet with Paul Coverdell. To hear Paul talk about how one lobbied, and how one made change in government, and how this group of women volunteers could create a system in which kids were going to be in car seats because it was safer. The League of Women Voters—I was president of the Atlanta-Fulton League, so very involved in the Fulton delegation down there, and got to know Kil Townsend. Marvelous man who had skills beyond—sort of a renaissance fellow in lots and lots of ways; wrote books about colleges around the country, and what you needed to do to get into them, and what they were going to be like when you got there. Sort of the early college guides.

I finished my term as president of the league and one night at a cocktail party, Kil Townsend said, “You need to come to the capitol with me. I need you to be my aid.” I thought I don’t know exactly what that means, but it’s a good time to do it, there’s a little window, a little crack, why not do it. So I did. He taught me the importance of constituent service, he taught me the importance of maintaining a sense of humor, and he was the person who thought it was ridiculous we had sales tax on basic food, but not at all ridiculous that we had sale tax on lobsters and caviar. There was a real sense of fairness in the Kil Townsend I knew. And of course, it harkens back to a time I was in Washington one of my college summers. I spent the summer with Sam Gibbons, congressman from Tampa-St. Pete, back in the glory days of congressional interns. And Sam and Kil very much reminded me of each other; different political parties but still that real emphasis on the constituent they served.

For Sam Gibbons, I did three things. I wrote new baby letters to every baby who was born in his district. I wrote wedding letters to every couple that got married in the Tampa-St. Pete district. And I took folks from Florida on tours of Washington. First day I was there, he pulled into his pocket and he threw the keys across the desk at me, and he said, “Please go get my car, I need to go to the airport.” “Yes Congressman, how do I fit into that plan?” He said, “You’re going to drive me.” So I found his car, we found the airport, and at the end of it, he took a key off of it. And he said, “This is for you for the summer. Every time somebody from Tampa-St. Pete comes to my office and needs a tour, you’re going to take them.” And then he pulled out a list and he said, “Here are the things you need to see, and my only rule is you can’t see any of them twice until you’ve seen them all.” So constituent service; people thought I was actually knowledgeable about what I was learning about because I had to learn real fast the night before I took them some place.

SHORT: At what point did you decide to run for office?

ASHE: Never had crossed my mind that I would run for office. I loved being behind the scenes. I loved working on causes that needed advocacy. I loved working with the folks who were getting the job done. But then John Lupton decided mid-term that he was going to stop and go work for the Olympics, and that he really couldn’t be a legislator and do that at the same time. And so there was an open seat. And like many of particularly women who got in office in the 90s, it was one of those places where a crack developed and people said, “Why don’t you do it?” It took a little while to convince myself that was a good thing to do but I jumped in.

SHORT: You now represent a district you referred to as the Peachtree Road Race.

ASHE: That was the first district I represented and that’s a district that really is the northern heart of Atlanta from Lennox Square down to Ansley Park where our family lives. It was a great

district, a fun place to run. First race there were seven other candidates in the race. I'll never forget in the run-off driving up Peachtree to discover this little stack of ashes in front of an apartment building with a title that said, "Atlanta was sent to the ashes once before, don't vote for that Ashe woman." We learned lots about politics that first time around. Some of the folks were great friends and maintain that friendship with them to this day. A couple of the others I've never seen again and I'm grateful. But that was the time our children—our son turned sixteen during that election, he thought driving to put up a yard sign was the best thing that ever happened, and our daughter learned how to answer the telephone. So it was a real family effort. My husband gets very involved. He's a good fundraiser and he's a real good cheerleader.

SHORT: How many times has your district been reapportioned?

ASHE: It seems like over, and over, and over again and in virtually every year. And it does happen on a fairly regular basis. It was that first one and then we went through that series of looking at multi-member districts. In some ways, I think it was the Democratic Party getting a little selfish. And we tried to preserve some districts by putting four of them together, three of which were solid Democratic districts, one of which might have been a Republican district, and to make it a multi-member district and so people ran in these big mega districts. So we had one episode of that when we went into DeKalb County that was a different kind of race, it was about the size of a senate district. And then there was the reapportionment after I changed political parties and that one changed the make-up of this district substantially.

SHORT: Let's talk about your decision to change parties. Why?

ASHE: I'd love to go back to 2001 and do it all over again because other than marrying my husband Lawrence, it was probably the soundest decision I ever made. I didn't change at all myself except my party label. I'm not wearing pearls today but as I described in those days, I wore pearls before I changed and I wore pearls after I changed. My political philosophy is still very much the same that it has always been. As a moderate Republican, I was in favor of a woman in a family's right to make reproductive choices. I was very much in favor of getting the confederate battle emblem off the state flag. I had been very involved in education reform from the very beginning. And Bob Irvin, who was in those days when I was a moderate Republican our party leader, put up with that and it was not seen as—clearly people looked at me and said, "You're that liberal Republican." But I was exactly who I was. And then we changed party leaders, and I was told that I could no longer support changing the confederate battle emblem of the state flag. And I was told that I could no longer support the Roy Barnes education reform efforts that I'd been working on the entire time that he'd been governor, and that I believed in strongly the same things they were doing in Texas with George W. Bush. And I guess my family would tell you that you don't tell me what to do very well, at least if you expect me to follow the directions that you're giving me. And so I went home after that direction giving and thought, I got to brush my teeth, I've got to be able to look myself in the mirror, I've got to be who I am and if politics makes me into somebody else, it's not worth it. And so I turned around and in January of 2001, wrote all of the people who had just elected me as a Republican, no opposition on either side in that election, and said, "Because I can't be who I am where I am, I need to move to a broader tent, and I'm going to be a moderate Democrat." So here I am. I still believe in all those things I believed in.

SHORT: What do you think caused that shift in the Republican Party?

ASHE: Oh, I wish I know because I think it has been detrimental to real substance in politics and in public policy. I think it's much more based on a set of I have mine, and I'm going to keep mine, and I don't really much care about somebody else. I think it's a much more these are the absolutes and here are the hoops you're going to jump through and everybody's going to jump through them. And I don't think people are quite that in one place.

SHORT: How did moderate Republicans like Kil Townsend and Paul Coverdell react to that shift of philosophy?

ASHE: Bothered Kil Townsend until the day he died. He was an unhappy camper with the way in which the Republican Party had evolved in Georgia and I suspect nationally. I think Paul went the other way and just became a part of it. I think going to Washington tends to make you play more solidly in one camp or the other. In the Georgia legislature in those days, as you well know, people sort of flitted back and forth across lines. It maybe had more to do with urban rural. It had to do with Democrats being fairly conservative. And when I think about Tom Murphy, I don't think of somebody who was very liberal. I think about somebody who had, sort of like, I like to think about myself as being fiscally conservative and socially open, socially progressive.

SHORT: Tom Murphy is a Georgian legend. How did you get along with him?

ASHE: Oh, I'm going to say it. The first time I went in to see Tom Murphy, I had just been elected, and you went into see Tom, Mr. Murphy, and you waited a good long while to get in to see him. And you sat down, and he pointed to a sofa in which you were supposed to sit, and I sat down on that sofa. And I realized that it was probably not the best angle to be sitting because the sofa sloped just like that, and so your bottom was way down low and your knees were way up high and you were literally looking through your knees to see him.

We had an interesting discussion. I was immediately impressed with how much he knew about this new member of the legislature. I came in at the same time that Louise McBee from Athens came in, and she told me that it was an interesting interview and it really was an interesting interview because he wanted to know what I wanted to do and what I was interested in. And so I immediately talked about my interest in education and my interest in natural resources he said, "Well, I'm going to put you on the Banks and Banking Committee." I sort of looked at him and I said, "Well, you know, Mr. Murphy I think that's probably a real good thing for me to learn about. And I remember that, in your early days in the legislature, you chaired the Banks and Banking Committee. So if I run into questions about it may I just come in here and ask you what it is I ought to be doing about a particular issue?" "Well, little lady, how did you know that?" I said, "Mr. Murphy you've learned a little about me before I came in here today, I would have been foolish not to learn a little bit about you before I came in here today."

He and I had a great relationship. Before I left that day, I said, "I'm never sitting on this sofa again." And he laughed at me and he said, "Probably a good idea." And at that point, he in many ways took me under his wing. And when he would rule on one of the house rules and make a decision, he would look over at me and with his fingers give me the number of the rule

so that I actually learned the little red book fairly well, fairly quickly, with his help. Surely, there were some things that drove us all crazy about him but a real, real Georgia legend.

SHORT: You've been through some very historical times. Here we are in 2010 with a severe economic problem in Georgia. You're on the Appropriations Committee.

ASHE: I am.

SHORT: What do we do?

ASHE: We don't expect magic bullet. We don't say this is going to be over in six months, or nine months, or three years. I think we move toward a more stable source of not only funding, but a little critical source of what freebies we give away. We clearly need to look at many of the tax exemptions that we've created over the years. We need to make sure and we did with a bill this year, that there's some evaluation of if indeed we give a company a tax break of x, y, or z, do they really bring the jobs to Georgia? Do they really contribute economically to the state, or did we just give that away and never hold anybody accountable? We need to be much more accountable on those I think we need to be more accountable on how we spend money. I think we really have to figure out what our priorities are.

This year's budget I voted against because my priority is education and we saw draconian cuts in both K-12 and in higher ed that I think will in the longer time be damaging to our state. I think we need to get more conservative about how we decide how to use energy. I think it's important that we make our buildings energy efficient. I think it's important that we make some investments that are going to cost money that are going to pay out over time. It's depressing, and it's sad, but it's not impossible. Families all over Georgia are figuring out how to live in tougher times and maybe we will never go back to thinking we can afford everything all the time.

SHORT: You spent much of your time and energy on education. Let me ask you a general question. Are we spending on education what we should and in the right way?

ASHE: Those are really hard questions to ask because it's real hard to know how individual systems are spending money. We talk about the word accountable but we're not yet in a place that in education we can say if we spend these dollars on this program, this group of kids will achieve this achievement. There's not the accountability for how the dollars are spent for the results they produce. So we may be funding some things that we don't need to fund, and we may be not funding some things that we ought to be funding. Sometimes I think we are pennywise and pound-foolish. The idea that we decided art doesn't need to be in K-12 education, I just don't believe that. I believe that art and music have a role to play in for instance, how do you learn math? Your math and upper level courses is going to be better if you've had some music training along the way. So I think we got to really look at what it is we're doing, find ways to be accountable, and find ways to spend money where we need to. I'm not prepared to say we're not spending enough, I think some places we're probably spending too much, but there's clearly places where we are spending too little and maybe on the wrong things.

SHORT: Should we rely on the federal government to help fund education?

ASHE: Education has to be a partnership. It has to be a partnership that starts with a child's parents in that early childhood education. It's got to be a partnership with the community resources that help children come to school healthy, ready to learn. Local government has to play a role. I really believe in local control and that the education our constitution tells us we have to do that and I think folks closest to the kids know what's important. They've got to have some skin in the game, states got to have some skin in the game, and as we as a country compete internationally, the federal government has got to have some skin. Yes, I believe we're all part of this and it's working out who does what for whom when that's the hard part.

SHORT: Another serious question. How can our school systems excel with all these massive budget cuts, and teacher layoffs, and larger classes, and other things that we are unaccustomed to in this state?

ASHE: I don't think they can. And in my most negative moments I have to tell you that I think some of these budgets, some of these restrictions, larger class sizes, teacher furloughs, are all in an attempt to create a system that cannot work so that people who don't believe in public education can say, "See, It doesn't work." We have to move to a voucher program. We have to move to public support going to private institutions. I think we need to support the public institutions and give them the power, and the freedom, and the resources to get the job done. And that's a very basic philosophic position. I think, unfortunately, there are some Georgians who really don't understand why every Georgia child should have an opportunity to have an excellent education.

SHORT: So you believe in vouchers.

ASHE: No, I do not believe in vouchers.

SHORT: You do not believe in vouchers.

ASHE: I do not believe in vouchers. I believe that vouchers are a very last ditch attempt. But vouchers take resources from public systems and put them in private systems, and maybe there'll be a day that we have to do that. Clearly, we do a little bit of that right now with universities; we do some small tuition equalization grants to kids who go to private schools. I don't think that's the way for us to go in K-12 education.

SHORT: How about merit pay for teachers, we hear a lot about that.

ASHE: I am a person who believes in merit pay for teachers, but you've got to have the tools in place to make it work. You've got to have a teacher evaluation system that is agreed upon not by somebody in Atlanta but by teachers all across the state so that when a teacher is evaluated, they are evaluated in what they perceive to be a fair way. Clearly, test scores have to be involved but we better do it in way that we don't have these cheating scandals that we're talking about now. You better do it in a way that's based on student growth. It's real easy. I could find a school today that I can go teach in and teach the cream of the crop and I'd look like a great teacher. But if I went to a school where kids are challenged both at home and at school, I might look like a failure. So we got to get a growth model so that if that child who's struggling makes this much

progress in a year, that teacher gets the credit for working with the student to enable that learning. Where is it if a kid whose bright and on their way to University of Georgia or Georgia Tech makes that much progress, that may not be enough progress to be considered adequate for that child.

Merit pay is much more complicated than it looks. There has to be a fair system of evaluation. Test scores have to be used in appropriate ways, and there need to be ways for teachers who aren't adequate for the job at the moment to gain those skills. We can't just say you're gone, we got to be willing to do the same sort of remediation that we need to do with kids.

SHORT: What about charter schools?

ASHE: Well, I'm sort of a big fan of charter schools. I believe charter schools within the public school system give us the opportunity to have different kinds of schools. When I go to Baskin Robbins I don't always eat the same kind of ice cream, and when I'm sending my child to a public school I don't want to always have that child in a school that looks just like the school next door. The district I represent has a KIPP WAYS Academy. It's a middle school. It's a school where kids go to school longer school days and longer school years. It's a school where parental involvement is absolutely insisted upon. It's a school where classrooms are given the names of colleges based on where the teacher went to college to always keep in the minds of the kids that college is the next step.

These schools are doing remarkable things, great music programs. Those are charter schools. We have some wonderful charter schools. The other good thing about charter schools is we let them fail and we can close them down if they don't work. And so charter schools are a part of the public system. They are a part of the variety that the public system at its best can be. Sort of going back to that early demonstration school in Tallahassee, Florida, where kids had a different way of getting academic instruction. Kids don't learn alike and our two children didn't learn alike.

SHORT: How do you feel about homeschooling?

ASHE: I think it's a right we need to give people to have. I would never have been a good homeschool mother. I would have driven our children crazy within the first several weeks; I would have thought they ought to know it all by the time the first day was over. I think there are some people who believe it is a good way to go about it. I think homeschoolers need to be assessed in the same sort of ways that we assess public school students. It's a little bit like if we ever get to a voucher program that voucher school, that private school, in my book is going to have to give the same test that we give public school students so that we could see if those voucher dollars are really valuable. I feel the same way about homeschools. I think we need to have accountability because those are dollars that people have paid to government so we need to make sure they're working. We can't just say parents like a voucher program because their kids are happier at school. We got to make sure they're learning; that's the bottom line of school.

SHORT: Several county school superintendents that I've talked with in recent times think the state should do more in early education.

ASHE: There is no doubt about it. I am the grandmother of a twenty-month-old Isabel, and

when I see what Isabel is able to acquire in language in those twenty months, this old reading specialist is astonished. That little girl picks up language like that because people have used language with her. They were reading her books in utero. I think we've got to make certain that all of Georgia's parents understand what happens between that day that baby is conceived and what happens between the day that baby goes to the first grade or to kindergarten. It's a huge impact on—there's some wonderful programs. B.J. Walker is working on a program called Reading by the Third Grade, a real effort to say kids need to be able to read to learn by the end of the third grade and we've got to start that at the very beginning. An old Casey fellow who's working with folks in six different systems to make sure early learning is a huge part. The United Ways around Georgia have been very involved in early learning issues.

SHORT: Well, let's turn now to other historical events during your career. You mentioned changing the flag. Oh, let me go back and ask you about Hope Scholarship.

ASHE: All right.

SHORT: There's some concern that the funds might disappear. Is that—?

ASHE: Well, we've had that concern over the years at various points and I think this time it's not crying wolf. I think this time we're really going to have to make some hard decisions. The projections from the House Budget Office are fairly dire about can we really afford to continue to do all that we've been doing. We've passed some emergency stop gaps that may well come into play in this next year about textbooks and supply fees, etc. I think it's one of those we need to study very carefully. Hope has for us been a marvelous way to keep Georgia's brightest in Georgia. And it's one of the things that I think this next administration is going to have to work really hard to make sure that we continue to make it absolutely fair.

There's folks in Atlanta who are concerned. There's a wonderful lawyer, Emmett Bondurant, who has been very involved in saying why do we do Hope Scholarship for kids who have the economic wherewithal to go to college anyway? Should it be more needs based? When that change was made, people were worried will it work but that change was very popular and it has kept kids in Georgia. So we need to ask all sorts of questions and of course one of the bottom line questions is are dollars spent on Hope Scholarships for college years, might those dollars be better spent in early years? So there's always the tension between those two pots, the pre-k program that's not serving every Georgia kid that could be served and the scholarship program. Our lottery has been very successful. They've continued and continued to raise revenue. They need to keep doing that, but we need to think about how we're going to spend those revenues. Georgia was brilliant in saying those lottery dollars can't be spent for anything other than. Brilliant.

SHORT: Back to the flag. You introduced the bill early to remove the confederate emblem from the flag.

ASHE: Tyrone Brooks, a real leader in many civil rights issues in the state had been introducing a bill; I cosigned it immediately when I became a member of the house. Georgians need to find ways to unite, not divide, and a visible flag that was a source of division didn't make any sense to me.

SHORT: And the bill passed eventually.

ASHE: Eventually, took a long time. It took real strong gubernatorial leadership to get it passed. It took strong business interest saying you know it's not in the best interest of Georgia economically to continue to be labeled as that state that has that symbol on its flag. It's one of those that should have been a no-brainer, but somehow it became very controversial.

SHORT: Some people think that defeated Governor Barnes when he ran for a [indiscernible] term.

ASHE: I think that defeat was a perfect storm. You've got the flag, you've got the teachers who were worried, they worried then, not like they are now, but there was worry then. It was a perfect storm, and I think there were people who were voting to say "wait a minute, let's not let this be a landslide." And all of a sudden woke up the next day and it was defeated.

SHORT: What was your reaction to the outcome of that election?

ASHE: I was shocked, I was dismayed, and we've spent eight years trying diligently to keep some of the pieces of his reform in place. Be it the reform that happened with property tax issues. Be it the reform that happened with transportation; making Greta really a workable solution for regional transportation. Making this education reform stick with what really needs to be done. It's been a hard eight years.

SHORT: You did a lot of work on gender legislation.

ASHE: Well, it probably goes back to those Agnes Scott days and the sense that in my high school, not only was physics a problem, athletics were a problem. And girls deserve to play sports. Sports are a great place for learning how teams work. Sports are a place for learning how success and failure all fits in the same arena. So I've been very involved with girls and athletics and making sure that our schools provide opportunities that are fair and appropriate.

SHORT: What are some of the other issues that you have championed?

ASHE: Well, my current issues and it's always where are you right now and what are you interested in, I have a couple current issues that I'm very interested in and one of them is what happens to Georgians when they come out of prison. Georgia has a very high percentage of folks who are incarcerated. We also have, according to some of the latest data, one of the most restrictive sets of policies about what people can do when they get out of prison. And so finding a place to live, finding employment, finding healthcare, all issues of tremendous challenge. I work closely with the Center for Working Families down in NPU-V, Mechanicsville, the Adair Park, great neighborhoods. And Casey has taken that cloister of neighborhoods on and is working hard, and one of the issues that's come out of there is you can't sit in a group of young men who have come out of prison and have them say to you, "We've been turned by this company for this job, by this company for this job. We've been trained to be carpenters but we can't find a job. Ms. Ashe what choice do we have but to go back to prison." So a huge piece of

my work right now is to try to figure out how we can do a better job in Georgia working with the Georgia Justice Project, working with the United Ways, working with Casey, working with the Morehouse School of Medicine, to bring partners together to try to work on what is a real dilemma for lots of folks. And, parenthetically, cost the state lots of money because when somebody goes back to prison, we're the people who pay.

SHORT: Let's talk about water.

ASHE: We've got to have it and it is a huge conundrum. I was at the Sustainability Roundtable just last Friday talking about what happens if this court decision really holds, what happens if these three governors can't get together and solve a problem, and what power does Georgia really have in that negotiation right now when the court's ruling so far has said "Georgia tell us about Lake Lanier, you better not withdraw for drinking purposes." So huge decision; it's a big thing in this year's election cycle. Clearly, the bill we passed this year about water conservation was a step in the right direction. It's an incentive bill; it's not a mandate bill. I hope Georgians figure out that, I hope I figure out, that just because it rains yesterday afternoon, the droughts not really over. That just because this has been a slightly wetter year we're always going to be able to turn the spigot. I think water and transportation are the two issues that have the potential of limiting Georgia's growth.

SHORT: Long discussion about immigration. Georgia has an immigration law I'm told is not enforced. Is there a solution to the problem?

ASHE: I think immigration is a federal issue. I think it's a very difficult issue for individual states to take on. I think individual states have an obligation to their citizens and to the people who find themselves here often through no fault of their own, like a child who is born in Georgia. Even if their parents are not documented, I'm not going to say to that child no education, no healthcare. This is a country of immigrants. For us to all of a sudden decide that immigration is all bad I think is a huge mistake. We have business interest in Georgia that depend on people who've come from other places. There are very few of us who live in Atlanta who are real Atlantans; I'm not going to hold it against folks. I understand the frustration, I understand the shortage of resources, but somehow we've got to have a federal solution that then the states figure out how to implement in the best ways for the folks who live there. I am not going to jump up and down about immigration except to say please let's be fair.

SHORT: We hear a lot about breaches in ethics nowadays. Are our ethics laws weak or do we just not pay attention to violations?

ASHE: We strengthened the ethics laws this last time. Speaker of the House Richardson worked very closely with Representative Mary Margret Oliver in doing some things that really help with some of the reporting because one of the things that is essential is we be transparent. And so when somebody gets a contribution from somebody, their constituents ought to be able to figure that out, see where the money went, and know where it came from. I think we still have some things to do. I'm one of those people who believes in a gift ban. I would be perfectly delighted if people couldn't buy me a cup of coffee. I would feel better about it. Now, I come from a circumstance that serving in the legislature is for my family, an issue of civic rent. This

community has been very good to our family and so we like to think about it as the rent we pay is to share momma to the capitol, and to share momma to public policy, and almost as an expense to us. And not everybody has the opportunity to do that.

SHORT: Why do you think Americans have lost confidence in government?

ASHE: I think the problems are so huge and I think the need for immediate solutions so high that somehow they don't mesh. I also believe that we've become so divided among political parties that we have a hard time coming to consensus in the middle. Back to my League of Women Voters days when we didn't decide on public policy until sitting around in a room we could reach consensus. Where are the common areas? We've lost that a lot in government.

Now, I have a theory about why've lost some of it. And it's gotten worse since I've been in the legislature in these eighteen years. And some of it is that computer that also makes government a whole lot easier. But that computer allows folks in government to draw districts during reapportionment that are so safe for one of our parties or for the other that there're not many real contested races. If you look at the congressional races around the country right now, the races are most often conducted in the primary because this is a Republican district and so the folks who have a shot at being elected are Republicans. So you've got some very conservative Republicans, and you've got some even more conservative Republicans, and you might have a moderate Republican. In a Republican primary, who's going to win? Often it's the person more on the edge. Same thing's true over here. You've got very liberal Democrats; you've got some moderate Democrats. Often in a primary, it's the extreme that wins. And so there's not much of a race in November because it's either a Democratic or a Republican seat. And so where is the discussion? In the middle. So those of us, I like to call myself a raging moderate, have a hard time figuring out how we fit because we don't fit way over here and we don't fit way over here, and when parties are dictating what happens, they're in lieu in the middle.

SHORT: It's called the sensible center.

ASHE: The sensible center, that's better than raging moderate. I'll call myself the sensible center. And it's really interesting because there really isn't a sensible center caucus at the Georgia Capitol, there really isn't a sensible center caucus in Washington, and yet I suspect most Americans live in that realm of not believing this is right or this is right but right somewhere in the middle. And I think if you don't hear your voice being expressed, you don't believe you matter. And if you don't believe you matter, why would you have confidence in the product.

SHORT: What do you think about the current Tea Party?

ASHE: I think it's an expression of what's going on on the right. I think it's an expression of the incredible frustration that these current economic times have produced. I think it's an attempt to find simplicity in very complicated stuff. Once we had a minister, we worship down at Central Presbyterian Church, right across from the capitol, and we had a minister who had a great phrase. He said, "There are too many people afflicted with premature certainty." And I sort of see the Tea Party as a collection of folks who have a premature certainty about the way things ought to be. Parenthetically, if I have to vote on an issue at the capitol, if I can't argue

both sides, I don't think I've done my homework. I think people in government have an obligation to know both sides of an issue before they decide where they're going to come down.

SHORT: Do you think the sensible center could be a third party?

ASHE: No, because we probably don't have enough in common to be able to hold ourselves together. I think the things that hold parties together are probably the things that cause parties the problems. I'd love to think so. And there are some times that some of us at the capitol sit down and talk about how could we do this better as a team, so maybe there little glimpses of that hope. I may leave this interview determined to find a sensible center.

SHORT: Please do.

ASHE: Thank you.

SHORT: In addition to water, Atlanta has some severe traffic problems.

ASHE: No doubt about it.

SHORT: How do you solve them?

ASHE: You don't solve them in one geographic area. The reality is that neither water nor transportation conveniently fit in what we call political jurisdictions. Water flows from one county to another, it flows from one city to another. Transportation goes from one place to another. The whole idea of how counties in Georgia were started so you could drive in a buggy to the county seat, sometimes I think political jurisdictions get in the way and clearly it's got to be a regional approach to transportation. Clearly, the bill we've just passed is a first step. Does it go far enough? No. Does it go fast enough? No. But does it say we are committed to solving transportation problems? It does.

SHORT: Tell us about the bill.

ASHE: Well the bill gives different regions the opportunity to vote on a sales tax for that region, and that region will decide the projects that will be done. Now there are some overlays from the planning director from the department, but basically is a step to say that regions know what the need to do, regions need a funding source for doing the work in transportation. It's a first step.

SHORT: What if they vote not to do it? Opt out as it's called.

ASHE: We would be in a terrible place if a region doesn't decide they have a transportation problem. The good news about the plan is that in urban Atlanta, or urban Columbus, or urban Macon, or urban wherever, there's going to be the opportunity to use more rapid transit, to use more community kinds of transportation. Where is in areas where things need to be paved, that can be what's on the list. Georgia is a very diverse state in what we do in transportation has to acknowledge that, but it also has to acknowledge that all the parts are dependent on each other. You can't have strong cities if you don't have strong rural areas; it's got to all fit together and we

got to come around to figure out that we all depend on each other.

SHORT: You're known as one who brought civility to the Georgia House of Representatives because of your work with, you mentioned, Speaker Murphy, and the Republicans, and the Democrats. That's quite a compliment.

ASHE: I certainly take it as a huge compliment and a huge challenge. We need to keep that up. We need to make sure that that is a civil place where people figure out how to talk to each other. It's a great sorority, fraternity. Once you join it, you discover that the personal issues of your colleagues are very important to you and that doesn't stop for most of us at a political line. If a family is having trouble, I don't stop and ask if that's a Republican or a Democrat; it's a person. And I think that's the basis in which we figure out how to make this happen. In some ways, I think the old day when everybody stayed at the Henry Grady Hotel was a great deal because everybody got to know each other and you got to know each other as somebody who played cards with you at night, somebody who went out to dinner with you. And now we so much try to get back to home, try to get back to where we represent, that I think we've missed some of that coming together to have fun.

SHORT: There must be something we've failed to mention.

ASHE: We failed to mention the Women's Caucus, and I think the Women's Caucus in the house is one of those places where folks from both political parties come together. Early on, we decided we needed a different kind of leadership; we've always had leadership that comes from both of the parties and comes from the minority community, so we have a sort of tri-leg stool of leadership. We don't agree on an agenda until both sides, or all sides, can come to consensus about it. Some years that means we don't have much of an agenda but some years it means we do some very valuable things like helping foster kids maintain some benefits while they go to college or working on making sure mammograms and Pap smears are available for Georgia's women. So the Women's Caucus is one of those little spots of hope for me in figuring out how people can get along at the Georgia Capitol.

We've missed talking about how important my family is to me and how central they are to what it is I get to do down there. It's an effort by not only my family but the friend community that I've built over the years. Married to the same guy for a very long time who is my biggest cheerleader—

SHORT: And a great lawyer,

ASHE: And a pretty good lawyer if I say so myself.

SHORT: He is.

ASHE: And very involved in things political from his brother-in-law who's just finished being the Ambassador to Poland. And so the political genes in this family are fairly strong.

SHORT: What are the major differences in the state legislature now and when you arrived there in 1991?

ASHE: It's much more contentious. It's much more divided by political party. It's much more intense. Now, there was an intensity in '91, but there was also a these problems aren't so big we can't solve them. The problems now seem to be so insurmountable that it's hard to figure out how to start chipping away at them. So I think there's a bigger level of frustration on the part of virtually everybody there.

SHORT: Looking back over your distinguished career, what do you think was your greatest accomplishment?

ASHE: Oh, what a wonderful question. I think to this day my great accomplishment is the way in which I have enabled people who are in the district I've represented, whatever it was, to be involved in government. To see that their input really mattered, be it a piece of legislation that somebody suggested needed to be done, that we could get pass. Be it an individual problem that somebody has had with government that I can help them get through. I think my biggest accomplishment is really being a way to empower people and to let people know that government is theirs.

SHORT: Your biggest disappointment?

ASHE: That we're still talking about the same things we've been talking about the whole time I've been there. We're still talking about education, we're still talking about transportation, we're still talking about water. It hadn't gotten better. It's changed. And little tiny things--. People ask me how I feel about this job and I'll tell you it's the most discouraging, disillusioning thing I've ever done. But every once in a while, something gets accomplished. Every once in a while there's a line item in the budget that's going to really matter to people and I know why I do the job.

SHORT: Have you ever thought of running for higher office?

ASHE: No.

SHORT: Would you?

ASHE: No. Perfectly, frankly, I like sleeping in my own bed with my own husband at night. I like living in Atlanta, I like being a part of Atlanta city government, I like being a part of what I get to do doing this job. If you ask me to create a job that I'd like better, I can't think of anything I'd rather do than what I get to do.

SHORT: How would you like to be remembered?

ASHE: Somebody who got the job done, who worked on behalf of people, who cared about her family.