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COVER STORY



Photos by David Trumple

Good Guy

A conversation with Kevin A. Kelly Award recipient Tom Cleary

by T. Scott

December 16, 2009

Lobbyists all scoundrels? Broad brushes paint poor likenesses, and there's no bigger exception to the popular rant than Thomas J. Cleary, retired multi-client lobbyist and former executive director of the Michigan Association of Broadcasters. Closing out 2009, Cleary has received the young but prestigious Kevin A. Kelly Child Advocate Award, bestowed by advocacy organization Michigan's Children. Cleary is the second recipient of the award and the first after the late Mr. Kelly. The two were close friends, and Cleary was selected for the award because of his deep, personal and selfless involvement in a wide range of charitable organizations and programs helping to feed, clothe and care for children and families in need.

Dome sat down with the 77-year-old Cleary in his East Lansing home, in the living room with photos of his and Barbara's nine children, 22 grandchildren and one great-grandchild prominently displayed, to discuss the award, his career and the legislative scene.

Dome: So what's with all the community service? Are you atoning for all your years as a lobbyist?

Cleary: (Laughs.) As a lobbyist I was busy all the time and did not have the opportunity to get involved in community service the way I wanted to. One of the people who guided me into community service was Kevin Kelly.

Dome: You two became good friends.

Cleary: I met Kevin when he first came to town, and I had an opportunity to kind of mentor him as he began his career with the Michigan State Medical Society. Then when I retired, Kevin encouraged me, guided me, as I got into these kinds of activities. It was a great relationship over a long period of time and we got to mentor each other.

Dome: What does this award mean to you?

Cleary: I'm honored to have my name associated with Kevin Kelly. It's very special. The organization, Michigan's Children, is a fine advocacy group for children in Michigan.

Dome: What do you think was key to being selected?

Cleary: I'm not real sure, but probably because of my close relationship with Kevin. My first love is the Greater Lansing Food Bank. I was on that board for 10 years and just went off the board. I was also on the board of St. Vincent's Catholic Charities and other organizations.

Dome: Talk a little bit more about your friendship with Kevin.

Cleary: When Kevin graduated from Michigan State and started with the Medical Society, his boss was Bruce Ambrose. Bruce, who was head of government affairs at that time, called me and asked me to get to know Kevin and help him out.

Dome: You ended up having a big influence on Kevin's life.

"I'm honored to have my name associated with Kevin Kelly. It's very special."

Cleary: Anything Kevin got involved with usually was successful. He was a very, very kind and energetic person — it was fun to watch him do his thing and to be a part of it. We did a lot of things together, and not just building relationships with clients. We'd meet fairly often for breakfast at Flap Jack Shack to talk.

Dome: Was that your headquarters first or was it his?

Cleary: That was his headquarters. A lot of people who work in the capital area begin the day at the Flap Jack, for meetings or conversation or whatever. It's nice to spend a lot of time there just talking about what's going on in the state, and in the community and with people's families.

Dome: That first question about atoning for being a lobbyist was in jest, but the conventional wisdom outside the state capital is that all lobbyists are disreputable people. How do you respond to that type of portrayal?

Cleary: First of all, why do people hire lobbyists? It's because they have an issue with the legislature. But as you know, there is the issue itself, and then there's the politics of that issue. They get mixed in together, and the average person is not able to sort it all out. That's where a lobbyist comes in. It's the same reason why people with other problems hire specialists. I've always felt that there's no magic trick to being successful in lobbying. It's based on two things: how well you understand the legislative process and who you know. Those are the two things that you have to have going for you in your career in the legislative consultant business.

Dome: Give us the one-minute summary of your career and how you got involved in lobbying.

Cleary: Sure. I was born in Escanaba in 1932, graduated from high school in 1950. Spent four years in the U.S. Air Force then went on to Marquette University and got a degree in business administration. My father had been very active politically in the Upper Peninsula and was a county Democratic chairman...

Dome: So you knew politics...



Cleary: Oh yes. My dad died at an early age, when he was 53. So I got involved in politics and was invited in June of '59 to come to Lansing as deputy in the state treasury. We then had an elected state treasurer, his name was Sanford Brown, and I served as his deputy for six years. During my time there we had three different governors: the last term of Governor Williams, the one term of Governor Swainson and then the first term of Governor Romney.

Dome: Did you handle the political end of things?

Cleary: Yes. Treasury wasn't that large then, we only had a hundred people. Remember, this was prior to the '63 constitution. There were only two state office buildings, the Mason Building and the Lewis Cass Building. All the state administrative board was in the Capitol, along with the lawmakers. It was a different time, and very enjoyable. As the political appointee of the treasurer, I tried to look out for some of the political activities as well as handling some administrative responsibilities. When it was over I had to decide my next career, so I thought I'd try lobbying and see how it went. It was a slow process.

Dome: Your treasury career ended because of the new constitution?

Cleary: The new constitution called for an appointed treasurer. There was a transition period, but by 1965 the transition was over and Allison Green was the treasurer.

Dome: And he was a Republican.

Cleary: Right. He had been speaker of the House. Actually, Green had run against Bill Milliken at the Republican convention over who was going to get to run for lieutenant governor under George Romney. Bill Milliken got it and Allison Green was appointed state treasurer by Romney.

Dome: So you went into lobbying. Did you start your own firm?

Cleary: Yes. My first client was dog racing. There was a group headed up by Win Schuler that was trying to get the law changed to allow dog racing in Michigan. There were two large groups opposed to it. The religious groups opposed it because it was an expansion of gambling, and the horse racing industry fought it because it didn't want any more competition. To this day, we don't have dog racing. But that was the first client, the one that got me started.

“Successful lobbying is based on two things: how well you understand the legislative process and who you know.”

Dome: There weren't as many lobbyists then, is that right?

Cleary: Right, but remember that government was smaller and the clients were not that easy to get. Most of the time they'd hire a lawyer to do some of this work. So that was the start — and it was a slow start. It took about five years to really get established.

Dome: Did you ever have second thoughts about the new career?

Cleary: We had six kids at the time.

Dome: The conventional wisdom is that former lawmaker Jimmy Karoub started the first modern multi-client lobbying firm. Some insiders say you were actually the first.

Cleary: Maybe if you say “multi” meaning more than *one*, but when you think of multi-clients you think of 10, 15, 20 clients. I came on the scene in '65, and Jimmy was serving in the House at the time. Jimmy started lobbying around '68 or '69, and then Jerry Coomes became active in the early '70s. So those were the two big ones. When I started there were other people around who had more than one client. But what I found early on was that in order to get groups' lobbying business they wanted you to be a part-time executive secretary of their trade association to go along with it. A good example was the broadcasters, who in '68 or '69 were looking to set up a part-time office and have some presence around the Capitol. That's how I got hooked up with them. I did that for 18 years, actually as their part-time executive director. Their office was in my office. It was a different era.

Dome: Did you have any other lobbyists in your firm?

Cleary: Just me, under the name Michigan Legislative Consultants. I did it for 15 years by myself, then Fritz Benson joined in '79 and Mike Busch came on in '87.

Dome: What did you enjoy most about lobbying?

Cleary: A big part of lobbying is teaching, because you're constantly trying to bring reality to your client. You have to, because they have a problem and don't understand why it can't be solved right away. I also felt strongly that clients had a perfect right to have their “day in court,” to have their point of view expressed in the process. On any issue there might be five or six groups that have a point of view. If all the points of view get expressed, good decisions are usually made. In many ways, that's the job of the lobbyists — to see that their client's point of view is plugged into the process. I always felt that way and tried to conduct myself that way.



Dome: You spent a lot of time on broadcast issues didn't you?

Cleary: They were challenging. Think about it, you're representing small-market radio and big-market television and everything in between. They have different issues...Also, every year we organized and put on a congressional dinner in Washington for the broadcasters, at the Madison Hotel. In fact, in 1976, when he was president, Gerald Ford came to our reception. He had come all the years before as a congressman, and here he was as president. It was great.

Dome: How about some of your other clients?

Cleary: One interesting multi-national client we really enjoyed a lot was McDonald's, because every lawmaker had a McDonald's in his district. That made it easier. A lot of the issues that came along [for many clients] were tax issues. When you really think about it, an awful lot of issues in the legislature have to do with money. When you sort through it all, the real issue is usually money. Another one of the early clients that I enjoyed a lot was the cosmetologists. Going back to 1929, cosmetologists were not allowed to cut men's hair. The law said the barber could cut the hair of any person and the cosmetologist could only cut the hair of a female.

Dome: Really?

Cleary: That's the way the law was, and they both had to be licensed. Then we came to the era in the 1970s when men started getting their hair cut and styled by cosmetologists. The law didn't catch up with it. Finally it got settled in court — it went to the Circuit Court and the barbers won. It went to the Court of Appeals and the cosmetologists won. And the first sentence of the opinion [in favor of the cosmetologists] said, "All hair is created equal." That's true. In the scheme of things it's not that big an issue, but to the cosmetologists it was very important. They were discriminated against. The court changed the law, and eventually we got that wording taken out of the statute. Those are the types of issues you can run into.

Dome: Who were some of your favorite lawmakers to work with?

Cleary: The Irish group — Mike Griffin and Jim O'Neal and Jerry Hart and Dick Young, Bill Ryan, Bob Mahoney, Ray Kehres and some of those guys.

Dome: Was it social as much as it was political?

Cleary: You're all coming together and you don't owe anybody anything and you relate to each other.

Dome: How have you seen lobbying and legislating change over the decades?

Cleary: I've been out of it for 15 years, and now we've got the full impact of term limits, which in my mind has been a disaster. We kick them out before they really learn the process and become good at it. That has caused a lot of problems. It needs to be resolved. The other thing, and I think about this often, is that with the economy we're going through, this has really been a terrible period for Governor Granholm. Think about it, she's been governor eight years and every year the economy has been going down the chute. Gosh almighty, this has just been hard. Learning to live with less is not an easy process, whether it's family or whether it's government. I remember what Kevin Kelly told me a number of years before this really started. He said, Tom, we're going to go through some tough times, but we're going to be all right. Michigan has a lot going for it. He was perceptive, he saw what was going on. I think we will be all right, but it will take a while.

"A big part of lobbying is teaching, because you're constantly trying to bring reality to your client."

Dome: What do you think is the state of leadership in Lansing? Are you critical?

Cleary: No, I'm not a big critic of leadership. We've got a problem with the political parties.

Talk about reapportionment — you have gerrymandering all over the place, so you don't have competitive districts like you should. You end up with too many districts where the election is all over in the primary, so you don't get [a more moderate] point of view. You can't just take a position and not be willing to compromise...take a half loaf now and get the other half later. You see too much hardening of positions and not enough compromise. I don't think compromise is a bad word at all, it's what the process is about.

Dome: Tell us about serving as a delegate to the 1960 Democratic National Convention in Los Angeles and nominating John F. Kennedy.

Cleary: It was exciting. I was at the treasurer's office at that point. I got to Treasury in '59, and this was 1960. I was a delegate from the 11th Congressional District. Governor Williams was leading the delegation, and he had endorsed Kennedy. In fact, candidate Kennedy had come to Mackinac Island to meet with Williams, and the governor endorsed him. The whole thing was a great experience.

Dome: What things stand out the most when you look back at your career?

Cleary: The biggest thing is that I enjoyed being part of the process. I really did. We had some good clients, and I found it rewarding to have clients tell me, after a year or so of being our clients, "you know, Tom, I'm starting to understand how this works."

Dome: This is your year for awards. You were recently inducted into the Michigan Association of Broadcasters Hall of Fame.

Cleary: That award was really for taking them to a full-time association. It was a three-year effort. They really needed to do it, and I took it on as a challenge. They knew they wanted the services, but they weren't sure whether they were ready to take on the full responsibility of a full-time organization.

Dome: You are a student of political history and are active in the Michigan Political History Society.

Cleary: I'm on the board. That's another organization that Kevin [Kelly] gave his leadership to at the very beginning. Another guy who's really been very good in the Michigan Political History Society is Richard McLellan. It's a very important organization. You can learn a lot from our state's political history.

Dome: If you could wave a magic wand and change one or two things about state government besides term limits, what would they be?

"If all the points of view get expressed, good decisions are usually made."

Cleary: Well, I'm not convinced of the wisdom of how we elect judges right now. Without being specific, just look at the Supreme Court. And we've got to do something about our tax structure. We just have to because it isn't working. I've asked myself this question many times: given that it isn't doing what it should do, do we make the changes by the legislative process or do we do it with a new constitution? You can really argue both sides of that. I'm not sure of the answer, but I'm sure something has to be done.

Dome: Does what's happening in state government, with services and employees and education being cut, bother you?

Cleary: Here's the problem we've got. Constituents are saying to lawmakers that they want it both ways — we want all the services but we don't want to pay for them. Until the message comes across clearly...we're going to continue to have problems. It's that simple. You can't

blame the lawmakers, because they're getting mixed signals — don't mess with the schools, but don't tax me. It's a tough one, but somewhere along the line the citizens have got to deliver a clear message, because it's not clear right now.

Dome: When you look ahead what do you see? Are you pessimistic?

Cleary: No, I'm not. I'm very optimistic. The glass is half full, not half empty. We're going to get out of this. We're going to do fine. Stay tuned.

T. Scott is editor and publisher of Dome magazine.

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