

Interview with Christopher “Kit” Bond on the subject of Parents as Teachers, July 31, 2014

Kenn Thomas: Think back to when you first heard about Parents as Teachers. Do you think there was something from your childhood or your experiences growing up in Missouri that enabled you to be such an advocate for PAT?

Kit Bond: I was very fortunate. I had a very attentive mom and dad who read to me all the time and they talked about things I had read, got me very interested in it and I found from the beginning that a good education was very important and I actually skipped a grade. I skipped second grade because I was in a small school in Arizona and I enjoyed the challenges more, being a year ahead. So education was always a big part of my life and my parents emphasized it all the time.

Kenn Thomas: We know that you were influenced by TESE’s conference on early childhood education in 1975. Then when you started your second term as governor, you decided to make early childhood education a priority. So tell us the story about your journey to become one of Missouri’s primary advocates for early childhood education.

Kit Bond: I worked very closely with Dr. Arthur Mallory, the director of the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education and we worked together and early on, my first term, I talked about lowering class size so there would be no more than 10 to 12 students in any classroom. I found that that was a very difficult hurdle to overcome because of the constraints of funding then so I pushed for lower class sizes, tried to emphasize education but I never really understood about Parents as Teachers until I had a very good meeting with Arthur Mallory. I believe it was in 1979. Actually, I was preparing to run against the fellow who had been elected to replace me but Arthur Mallory was willing to share with me the secret he’d learned about early childhood education and Mildred Winter’s great experiment. Well, the more he told me

about it, the more interested I became and I followed up, met with Mildred, I believe, and talked with her and then, in the summer of 1980, I knew that we were going to have our first child sometime in 1981 and I was extremely interested then. The potential arrival of Sam made me focus on early childhood education and I began my push to get early childhood education, specifically Parents as Teachers in and I began in my first message to the legislature in 1981, I asked them to pass Parents as Teachers and that began our journey. At the same time, Mildred Winter gave me the books that Bud White and others had written about early childhood education on which the program was based and I read them voraciously as did my wife. There was no parent educator available for us but we did have the books and when Sam arrived, we started reading a chapter or two ahead of what we should be doing and we found that what we learned from those books and some information that Mildred gave me, some very helpful things on dealing with the challenges of the early childhood. I later said that when you have a two-year-old, particularly if it's a son, if the child doesn't drive you nuts on a regular basis, either, a, the child is not normal, or, b, you're not normal but I found a lot of things that I could do to soften those terrible two's and they worked well on Sam.

Kenn Thomas:

During your terms as governor, or even during the four years between your terms, were there other things that came up in your life that affected your attitudes about or your interest in early childhood education?

Kit Bond:

Well, the two things that were most important were Arthur Mallory's description of Parents as Teachers followed by meetings with Mildred Winter and then the fact that we were going to be expecting our first child sometime early in 1981 were the things that truly focused me.

Kenn Thomas:

So, by the time your son was born, the PAT pilot program was already in full swing in four districts but as governor, you were living in Jefferson City so your family couldn't be part of the actual pilot?

Kit Bond: Actually, we were living in Kansas City and the mansion was undergoing renovation so I commuted from Jefferson City to Kansas City and back and Sam spent most of those four years in Kansas City and I learned how important it was for a sometime absent father to have the skills of Parents as Teachers. There's a lot of talk about how a single parent needs Parents as Teachers and we've all heard that two parent working families need it, but I was the ultimate working father because I worked away from Sam much of the time. So when I had time with him on the weekends, I was focusing on his development and education and really made the best of the time that I had with him then.

Kenn Thomas: So it's kind of like your personal experiences with Sam is what directed you to have more of a public role in supporting and promoting PAT.

Kit Bond: Yes, Sam was very important and I was probably too much of a doting father and I took Sam with me to conferences and I signed bills with him sitting on my lap but he was a very, very important part of my life at that time and I highly valued the information and the direction that Parents as Teachers materials had given us.

Kenn Thomas: Just because it's the weekend, your job doesn't necessarily end and yet you need to spend time with your son. How do the people working for you deal with that? Would you be like, "Oh, no, I need to spend time with my son"?

Kit Bond: Well, the people working with me knew what my priorities were and we had a wonderful group of executive security. Right after I was first elected, I received a series of death threats which I continued to receive throughout my career and obviously people who wanted to do me harm knew that one of the best ways to me would be through my son and wife, my family. So executive security from the high patrol, with the help of the Kansas City Police Department which provided us security in Kansas City, knew what the priorities were: You got to get the guy to his meetings on time and take care of him but you also need to be paying attention to his son, Sam.

Kenn Thomas: So you kind of hard-wired that to your whole public life?

Kit Bond: Yeah, the job of governor was one of the most satisfying jobs I've ever had. It was and it still is but Sam was a very important part of my life. I spent that second term in the governor's mansion.

Kenn Thomas: That's absolutely tremendous. For many years, it was virtually impossible to get both the House and the Senate in Missouri to support funding related to early childhood education development. So what obstacles did you face as you pushed for SB 658 and what did you do to ensure that it was passed?

Kit Bond: I have to say that when I first recommended Parents as Teachers, it went over with a thud and there were not a lot of people who were excited about it. I had a wonderful staffer named Jane Nelson who now serves...served on the Parents as Teachers board with me here who said, "Stay with it" and I recommended it in the 1982 session and I recommended it in the 1983 session and, when the time came to prepare for the final 1984 session, all my staff except one said, "Forget about Parents as Teachers. It's not going anywhere." Jane Nelson said, "I'm staying with you. Recommend Parents as Teachers." So I did but we had some fortuitous events: I worked with Kansas City Senator Harry Wiggins who was head of the Health Committee and we knew at the time that Parents as Teachers was not only important for education but for health and well-being and a wide variety of other things. I had convened a conference in 1981 with my director of social services, Barrett (Tung?). There was a 25 member conference on children, families and youth and the commission studied it for about a year and came back with recommendations and probably one of the most important recommendations was to adopt Parents as Teachers. There was a subcommittee that was working on child abuse and they said, "The best thing you can do to prevent child abuse is to help parents understand their children." There was another one focusing on health and that group said, "What we really need to do is make sure that very young children are tested for physical problems that might interfere with their learning ability." It so happens that they all came together and Parents as Teachers actually, I believe you can truthfully say, it pays for itself because they found that there were two very common problems in young children that could delay their learning intelligence by a year or

two, requiring special education and all kinds of special treatment. One of them was hearing impairment which could have been caused by even the build-up of wax in the ears, so getting children in to see a nurse between 11 and 22 months helped find that but one that really struck home with me, one of the things that they found along with hearing problems was something called Amblyopia or lazy eye and that's when one of the eyes does not develop and if it is not treated early on, you wind up with not being able to see out of both eyes and I had suffered from and still suffer from lazy eye. My eyesight never developed in one eye. So I had to judge fly balls with one eye and trying to judge fly balls with one eye is very difficult, and sort of dark humor, in my mother's declining years, she had a cataract operation and she lost the sight in one eye and she was really down. So I went to see her and I said, "Mom, tell you what: as soon as you get well, we'll go out in the back yard and I'll hit you some fly balls and teach you how to judge fly balls with one eye." She kind of faked...she saw a little bit of humor but not much in that one but now, Amblyopia is being treated and I think, thanks for Parents as Teachers, a generation of young Missourians is not going to suffer from the loss of vision due to Amblyopia.

Kenn Thomas:

Well, when you moved from Missouri politics on to...

Kit Bond:

Let me go back. There's some other questions in there. In 1984, Harry Wiggins carried the bill in the senate. Now, in that year, as in all years that I was in the governor's office, Democrats controlled the Senate by 70% so they had veto-proof majorities in both houses and what the Democrats did in the Senate was extremely important and Harry Wiggins moved the Bill along very well. It got down to the final weeks of the legislature. The legislature had passed almost all of my Bills and I had signed almost all of the legislature's top priorities but they had one priority and I had one priority and they wanted to get a pay raise for the legislature and the judiciary. I wanted to get Parents as Teachers. So I said, "You pass both and I'll sign both." Well, there were filibusters going on by Republican senators who happened to be lawyers. I don't know exactly who visited them on the last night of the last session of the legislature over which I...but I

understand they had a number of high level visitors who prevailed upon them to let Parents as Teachers go so I could sign the pay increase for the legislature and the judiciary. They passed Parents as Teachers; they passed the pay increase and I was proud to be able to sign both of them. It's amazing how sometimes if you work together with people across the aisle, you can find a way to get things done.

Kenn Thomas:

Okay, so when you moved from Missouri politics onto the national scene as a U.S. Senator, you remained a champion for PAT and you helped them to elevate it from a Missouri only program to something of a national concern. Now, you've been quoted often as saying that PAT is Missouri's greatest export. Why do you feel that way?

Kit Bond:

I really believe that Parents as Teachers was giving Missouri's children a head start over every other school district in the nation and I don't use that in terms of the basic program of Head Start but they were well ahead and I thought, this is something that can make a true difference in the educational achievement of all of the young people in America. That's why I think that Parents as Teachers is Missouri's greatest export. We believe that when you advocate Parents as Teachers, you are telling people across the country that Parents as Teachers is Missouri's greatest export. This can make a tremendous difference for all children and I am happy to see that Parents as Teachers is and has been moving forward, expanding into other states, not as quickly as I'd like. I know that (Kemp Thorns?) in Idaho have been very strong proponents. I worked to get federal legislation to move Parents as Teachers on a national level. One of the things that I started working on was Education Begins at Home and Senator Hillary Clinton was one of my lead sponsors on it. When she left the Senate, Patty Murray, a good friend from Washington State, joined me as a co-sponsor. So we pushed for Education Begins at Home because I think if the federal government were to take a clear-cut role and emphasize, when you're talking about education of young children, it does not mean more government programs. There's a lot of talk about what government is going to do to establish more government programs with schools and

classes but I really believe in the concept of parents as the best first teachers and I hope, as we move forward on the goal to get early childhood education, people will begin to realize that you have to empower and support parents as the first best teachers of their children. If we do, the United States can see the kind of progress that we have seen in Missouri from Parents as Teachers.

Kenn Thomas:

It seems like one thing that is important for people to understand is that early childhood education really has so many different benefits and I think people lose track. You already touched on some with healthcare and with Lazy Eye Syndrome but also it seems like there are economic benefits down the road, the educational benefits. Can you talk some about all the different benefits that you see coming from this early childhood education?

Kit Bond:

Well, we have seen in Missouri how Parents as Teachers helps educational achievement in the first few years of school. We know from the health assessments that have been made that many children have been able to avoid the problems of delayed education through physical impairment and we also believe that parents who have had training in Parents as Teachers know enough about their children to avoid child abuse in dealing with difficult situations. They know to get them the healthcare and to me, this is the best habit we can instill. I believe many of today's problems are caused by parents who don't take responsibility for children. Now, I'll have to go back and say that one of the great arguments made by some of the strongest opponents of Parents as Teachers is that it's a conspiracy. They thought it was a conspiracy to get government to take over education but the more I think about it, it is a little subversive because you get parents into the program of Parents as Teachers, you tell them it's going to help their children but what you really do is hook them into their child's education. You get them to understand. You change their way of thinking so they know that they must take responsibility for their children and continuing that responsibility. I remember when Sam was in second and third grade, he was supposed to read Mark Twain's Tom Sawyer so I developed a plan and I sat with Sam with a recorder and I read the book and Sam read the part of Tom Sawyer. When Tom Sawyer spoke, Sam

would speak on behalf of Tom Sawyer and that was a treasure. That was a great learning experience and Sam and I worked together...actually, we worked together very closely until he was in sixth grade and I tried to help him with his math and he finally told me with a stern look, he said, "Dad, we don't do math like you did in horse and buggy days so don't try to help me anymore." I had still established the pattern of working with and enjoying learning more about Sam as he learned more about the wide world around him.

Kenn Thomas: It's potentially a pretty important thing that people often don't seem to recognize, (sometimes?) Parents as Teachers has just as much benefit to the parents as it does to the students.

Kit Bond: Clearly one of the great benefits is that parents take responsibility for their children and it tells them how to take responsibility. I truly believe that we need far more parental responsibility these days and that is the secret message. That is the subversive message that Parents as Teachers has. You talk to the parent about getting their child educated but what you're really doing is educating the parent to take an active role in their child's education and I think that is all to the good.

Kenn Thomas: Well, I'd like to close on a two-part question: What are you most proud of about PAT's growth for the last 30 years and how would you like to see PAT grow in the future?

Kit Bond: Well, I was very excited to see Parents as Teachers expand to all the school districts in the state and I was extremely disappointed that budget cutbacks required...cost Parents as Teachers funding and I really believe that that's false economy. I've told that to my friends, Democrat and Republican in Jefferson City. We are talking about an investment. You want to invest in roads and bridges, yeah. I've helped invest in roads and bridges but the best investment you can make is in early childhood education and helping the parents become the responsible, best first teachers for their children. There's no greater investment we can make than that and I hope we will see a realization in Jefferson City that Parents as Teachers needs funding. In addition, I think there are ways that we need to expand the access to Parents as Teachers



and I have been working with the Parents as Teachers national center, Scott (Huppert?) and others to find ways to get Parents as Teachers online, for example. My son now has two young children and Parents as Teachers is not available for him and his wife to help with their children. As a grandparent, I would be more than willing to help pay a fee to get an online version of Parents as Teachers targeted to the age appropriate learning information to send out monthly or bi-weekly to help them as parents. I want to see Parents as Teachers' concept made available to everybody across the country. It's available in several foreign countries but it is a program that works. It's been demonstrated it needs to be made available on a very wide basis.

Kenn Thomas:

Well, you're a life member of the PAT board and you still share your wisdom with the organization on a regular basis. What does it mean to you to still be involved with PAT 30 years later?

Kit Bond:

When people ask me about the greatest accomplishment in my years as governor and senator, I still go back to Parents as Teachers. This one program is something that I think can make a true difference in our state, in our country and the world. I would like to see Parents as Teachers become the standard, educating parents to take responsibility and know how to take responsibility. When I think about Parents as Teachers, I don't think just about the broad program and the numbers. I think about the scores and scores and scores of individuals who have come up to me and said, "We just completed a session with our parent educator. Thank you so much." That, to me...you can talk about the price tags of buildings. You can talk about the price tag of anything, but like the credit card company said, "That's priceless" and when I go out and talk about Parents as Teachers, some adult in the crowd says, "Oh, I started out with the Parents as Teachers program. Thank you." Those experiences still highlight my life every time they come up and I look forward to hearing people tell me about their experiences with Parents as Teachers.

Kenn Thomas:

All right. I think we're good. Thank you so much.

Kit Bond:

Thank you.