

Allen

Continued from Page 1

shelf of files concerning University of Nebraska-Lincoln Chancellor Graham Spanier.

He's generous with his information; every few minutes, he presses a button on his phone and one of a half dozen secretaries enter. Usually, it's Rogene, who has worked at Allen's since 1965. Make a copy of this, he says, make a couple of this one.

When she returns, he holds the copy aloft, tilting his head a bit to see through his half-moon glasses, and reads a paragraph or two to support his statements. He marks a few lines with a highlighter, pink, yellow or green — whichever he grabs first, before handing over the evidence.

It's almost a dance, this wheeling and turning. Rogene enters, nods and twirls. And his voice keeps pace, humming along, keeping time with the long and twisting conversation.

He answers questions, freely, openly, often referring to the touchiest subjects before he's ever asked. But he never simply replies. He answers and expounds and moves on. Sometimes, he's changed the subject before the end of the sentence. He often pulls the conversation back to his pet subjects — teaching vs. research, the ridiculous costs of university buildings, Spanier's mistakes — answering questions he'd like to address, but was never asked. In this spoken waltz, Allen always leads.

Political debut

He begins at the beginning, 1971, when he first stepped into the political arena at a Hastings school board meeting. The district had adopted modular scheduling and his daughter, Kristin, had brought home her fourth grade schedule from Hawthorne Grade School. A family member noticed that the girl spent more than 60 percent of her day in study hall.

Georgene, his wife, asked Allen to go to the meeting. He didn't feel like going; it was right after the Cornhuskers had won the Orange Bowl, and he still felt a little hung over from free national championship champagne.

When he got to the meeting, he says, he noticed that most of the people there were educators. The group of mothers who had come to protest the modular scheduling felt intimidated and asked Allen to address the board.

At the very end of the meeting, he did. He remembers the superintendent standing up to shout at him and threatening to sue him.

"It doesn't phase me to have people shout," Allen says, recalling the incident. "I don't like it, but I won't back down."

Allen joined other parents who wanted to have the policy changed. He says he found proof that the district was not meeting accreditation requirements; the children were not in class enough.

After the first newspaper story was published about the group's efforts, only Allen and his wife kept fighting. The others didn't like seeing their names in the paper.

"So many people don't want publicity, don't want to run the risk of criticism," he says. "It's no fun to be criticized."

That same fear discourages people from running for office, Allen says. He tried to convince others to run for the school board, but no one was willing. So he ran. Hard. His wife even compiled a campaign brochure and went door to door with friends, talking to Hastings residents about Allen's plans.

Allen finished first out of 16 candidates, but he said his tough campaign, in which he criticized the current board, backfired a little.

"The board was so mad, I couldn't work with them."

He decided then, he says, to avoid campaign criticism of people he may have to work with after the campaign. It's a good rule, he says, that he acknowledges he has broken as a regent.

Modular scheduling was eliminated while Allen was on the board. "It was a victory for the people," he says.

When his school board term was complete, Allen decided to take his vision to the mayor's office. Hastings was falling behind North Platte and Grand Island, he says. He wanted for Hastings what he says he wants for his store and for the university: He wanted it to be more modern.

Allen says he wrestled with the city council every step of the way. City council members remember the struggle as frustrating and tiring. The experience kept council member Dennis Mullen from running for a second term.

"After fighting with Bob Allen for four years," Mullen says, "I was exhausted. I can look back and laugh now, but for years, I couldn't."

A memento from one highly publicized feud hangs on the wall beside Allen's desk just to the left of his autographed picture of Tom

Osborne and his 1985 Jaycees' Boss of the Year award.

It's a political cartoon from the Hastings Tribune depicting Hastings police carrying city councilman Paul Powers, who has been caught in the outhouse, to a council meeting.

It refers to a time that Allen sent police to bring Powers to an important city council meeting. The council needed quorum to decide whether Second Street would be widened. Powers abstained.

When Bill Welton ran against Allen in 1980, he said he was running against controversy, dissension and confrontation. In the primary election, Welton received twice as many votes.

Allen was discouraged. His political troubles were joined by business troubles. A large company had brought scanning to a Hastings grocery store, and Allen's lost one-third of its business.

Allen withdrew his name from the ballot, only to organize a write-in campaign days before the election. Welton won with 5,523 votes, but 3,296 Hastings residents wrote in Allen's names.

"I'm glad I didn't win," Allen says. "I think Bill did a good job."

And the break from political life allowed him to fully remodel his store.

From his office at the top of Allen's Shopping Center, Allen says he is not a good retailer.

Sales, says this 1994 Nebraska Retailer of the Year, do not come natural to him. Yet the store he started in 1963 has stayed alive, even grown, while other family stores have folded trying to compete with store like Wal-Mart.

A good retailer knows prices, Allen says, but he doesn't. He has a knack for display, he says, for form and presentation. He never even intended to join the family self-service drug store business.

He wanted to be an actor. After two years in the U.S. Navy Air Corps and four years at UNL studying business administration, Allen went to Chicago, where he worked at Montgomery Ward. But business wasn't where he belonged, he says.

He longed to be on stage. Once at the Omaha Community Playhouse, a man had approached him and asked him to read for a part. His nerves forced him to decline, but he'd regretted it later.

While working as an assistant buyer at Wards, he started looking into the New York Academy of Dramatic Arts. But something kept him from the theater — stage fright.

He'd experienced it before on the basketball court. If he made a mistake, he'd dig a hole in the back of his head, persecuting himself.

He knew this tendency would hold him back, but he was determined. He went to visit a psychologist, looking for a way to relax. The psychologist listened to his story and told him he'd be crazy to leave his job at Wards. "Do you always call people crazy?" Allen asked him. Allen tried another doctor and books on motivation before he gave up on acting.

Family matters

Back in Hastings, his mother was sick and his father had just bought his own self-service drug store. Allen came home.

"I was forever trying to come back and help them out," he says. "... I was forever after my dad and brother to modernize."

His father and brother were good retailers, but they weren't good with buildings and fixtures. Whereas, Allen had a gift for making things look good and modern.

"I'm ready for a change, I'm ready for the modern ways," he says. "If I have a fault, I'll try to go too fast."

His aggressiveness upset his brother, he says, and they didn't get along until they stopped working together.

Throughout his career, he's researched other stores and then copied their successes.

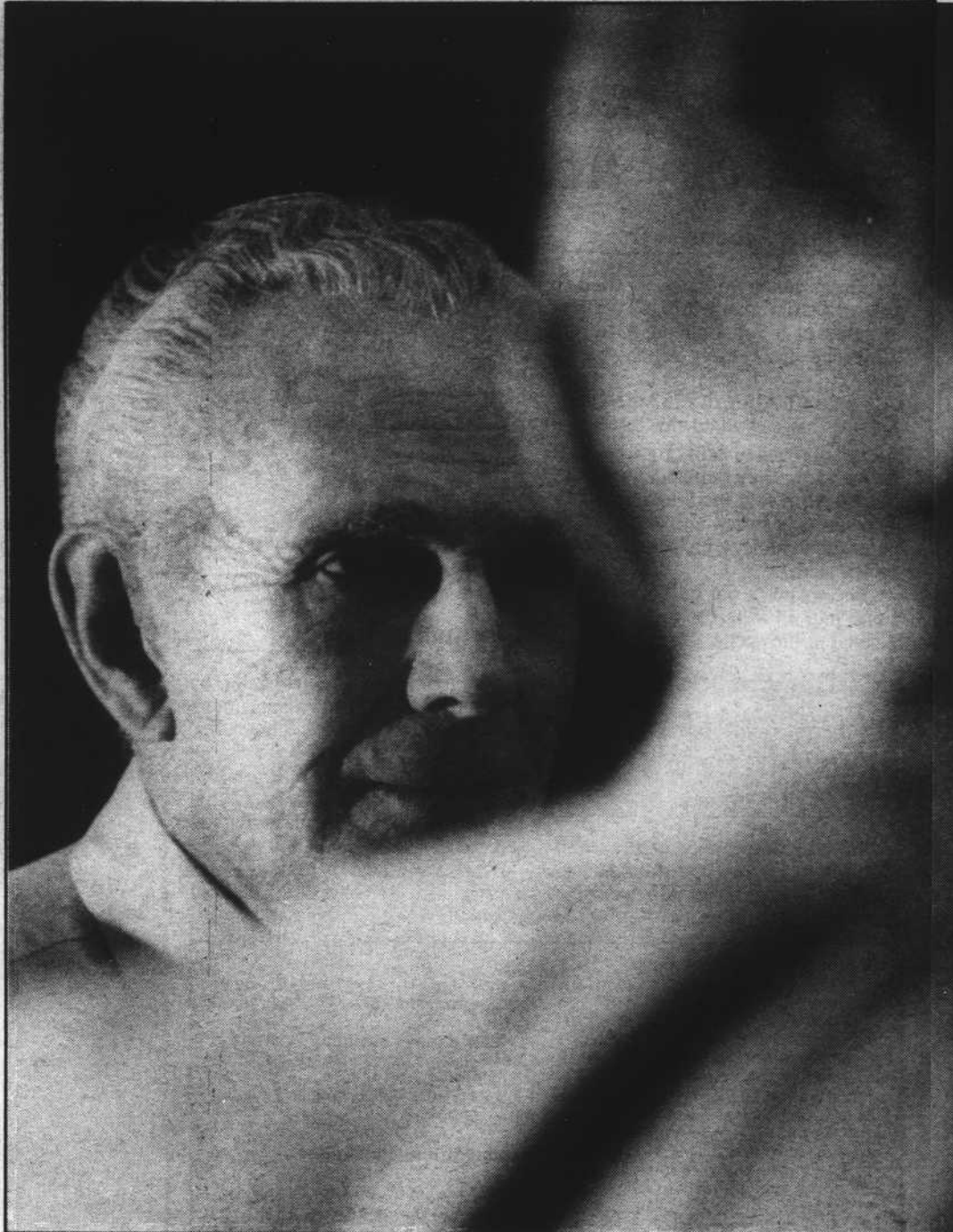
"If I see something's working, I'll swipe that in a second," Allen says. "It's so much easier to borrow from success."

This is what he did when remodeling the store, when building the new entrances and putting in a trendy espresso bar.

But his greatest regret is letting his dream die. You shouldn't do that to dreams, he says. At 68, he still thinks about entering the theater world. He has an idea for a Broadway play about Pearl Harbor. But he's happy with his life offstage. "It's just one of those things," he says.

Family came first back then, Allen says. He felt responsible for his parents, his brother and sister. He says he feels the same responsibility today for his children and his wife.

It was a cold night, and Georgene remembers that the foursome had made a late start. There was no time for dinner before the double daters went to the drive-in movie. She sat in the front seat with a fellow she'd been dating off and on. She could hardly make out the faces of the couple in the back seat, but the tall young



Above, Regent Robert Allen balances his duties as a father, a regent and one of Hastings' shopping center in Hastings Saturday. At right, Allen talks with John Atchity at the

man had caught her eye. When she got home that night, she told her mother, "I couldn't see too well, but I think we double-dated with the best looking guy."

A year later, that guy called her. She probably wouldn't remember him, he said, but his name was Robert Allen.

"I remember," Georgene replied.

Robert and Georgene Allen have been married for 36 years. She tells the story of their meeting much better than he. He can't quite remember where they went on their first date. She comes into his office to look for a Band-Aid and assures him that it was dancing at the Veterans of Foreign Wars club.

Georgene, who once taught music and drama, works in the store, usually in the gift department. The Allens' two sons, Erik and Bryant, also work in the store. Kristin works for a financial company in New York City. The children's faces hang frozen in time on the wall behind Allen's desk. As he refers to them, he motions backward.

When Erik pops into his father's office, Allen introduces him with pride. Shorter than his father, with strawberry-blond hair, Erik has stopped by to show his dad a news clipping that he might find interesting.

It was tough, balancing business with politics with family, Allen says. In the store's early days especially, he worked all the time. The store was open from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m., and he didn't frustrate anyone else to close the business. He was tired and often sick.

"I had a lot of colds, runny noses," he says. "I subjected that family to a lot of germs."

When Erik was 2-years-old, he came down with an extremely bad cold. A few weeks later, he swallowed a bunch of children's aspirin and was taken to the doctor. The doctor noticed some abnormalities in the boy's system. He had developed chronic nephritis, a disease that would destroy his kidneys.

Allen traces the disease back to the cold, which his father blames on germs he brought home because he didn't take care of himself.

"People say don't blame yourself," Allen says. "It doesn't keep me up at night ..."

But, he says, he was dumb then. Erik, now 33, has had two failed kidney transplants. The first was in 1991; the last was in December. The Allens were scheduled to board a plane chartered by the university to fly to the 1995 Orange Bowl. Kristin was home for the holidays, but she was getting ready to leave, too. Robert and Georgene Allen decided at the last minute to stay in Hastings and skip the big game.

That day, Dec. 29, a doctor from the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minn., called. They had a match for Erik, a teen-ager's kidney. The Allens immediately chartered a plane to take themselves, Erik and Kristin to the clinic.

Erik's body rejected the kidney within minutes. The Allens watched the Orange Bowl from a hotel room in Rochester. Georgene hid her head under a pillow until Nebraska started to win.

"We had a good time," Allen says, "except for the rejection."

Erik is lucky, Allen says, to have had the opportunity to have two transplants. Allen describes the transplants as "the biggest high and the biggest low."

"You think at last he can have somewhat of a normal life and then — bang."

The doctors say that next time, it will have to be a family member's kidney, but Erik will need at least a year to heal. In the past, Allen has worried that his controversial reputation would hurt Erik's chance at a transplant.

When the University of Nebraska Medical Center brought their proposal for a new transplant center before the regents, Allen was the only regent to vote against it. He voted for it twice, but it just kept getting more expensive.

"When I vote against a transplant building in Omaha," Allen says, "I think, 'Am I signing my own son's death warrant? Will they never call him now?'"

But, he says, he had to do what was right for the people, and the people do not need a \$52 billion, three-building complex.

"Being idealistic gets pretty old," he says, "trying to be honest, forthright and doing what's right for the people ..."

When the Allens returned to Hastings, someone told them a stewardess claimed she'd been given \$10 to make this announcement on the Orange Bowl plane. "We'll all have a good time now that Regent Allen decided to stay home."

Allen pulls out a copy of a letter he wrote to the airline, demanding an apology. "Graham Spanier was on that plane," Allen pauses and smiles, "but I don't think it was his \$10."

Higher education

Allen became regent in 1988, a time, he says, when much resentment hung over the board because some of the regents were upset with NU President Ronald Roskens. But Allen was optimistic and excited to be back in the education world.