



Photos by Jeff Haller/DN

Nebraska's foremost retailers. This portrait was taken looking into two mirrors at his store's espresso bar.

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ROBERT ALLEN
Hastings regent



"Today, I know much more about how the system works," Allen says. "It really doesn't work that well."

Allen began to lose respect for the board with Roskens' secretive dismissal and the selection of then-UNL Chancellor Martin Massengale to take his place.

A search committee selected four people to be considered for president. When Massengale was added to the list by the regents, the other four candidates dropped out.

In 1993, Allen distributed a letter to the press criticizing new Chairman John Payne of Kearney. Payne was too weak to lead the board, Allen said, and had caved in to Massengale's supporters back in 1990.

Allen broke his rule, and publicly criticized fellow board members. But, he says, looking back, he didn't think he would run for re-election. He was fed up with their shenanigans, he says. He thought he was finished with the regents. The least he could do, he says, was let the people know their system wasn't working.

"That was dumb," he says, shaking his head, because he did run for re-election and he still has to work with the board. He describes most of his time with the regents as "seven against one."

The board, he says, is cliquish, secretive, too concerned with mediocre politics. They're good people, he says, but they've lost touch with the electorate.

"All these people mean well in their hearts," he says, like a kind but exasperated father, "but they try to make decisions on their own, and it's detrimental to the system."

Alone on board

If Allen feels left out on the board, Regent Don Blank of McCook says, it's because the other regents don't feel comfortable talking to him. Things Allen did have made them nervous, Blank says, like recording his conversations.

Allen has a recording device on his phone. A secretary transcribes many of his phone calls, and then he destroys the tapes.

"I do everything I can for accuracy," Allen says.

This practice became public in 1990 when Allen gave transcripts of a conversation with Massengale to the Omaha World-Herald. Allen believed the conversation showed that Massengale was trying to help with Allen's campaign. The regents have a policy that for-

bids NU administrators from helping regents' campaigns.

The news that Allen was recording his telephone conversations caused a greater stir than his allegations against Massengale.

Allen now regrets releasing the transcripts. "That was dumb," he says, sighing. "Old honest, dumb me."

But Allen says the criticism doesn't bother him.

"I don't have any problems doing the right thing and taking criticism from people who don't agree. I try not to be rude," he says. Then his thoughts and thus the conversation turn to his present crusade. "I've got my hands full with this Spanier thing."

A copy of Spanier's resume sits on Allen's desk. It's the resume of a fine sociologist, Allen says, but not an administrator. Spanier has coddled social groups like the Gay and Lesbian Association, Allen says.

The dismissal of Engineering Dean Stan Liberty and Business Dean Gary Schwendiman's resignation further anger Allen.

"Even Scrooge didn't fire people at Christmas," Allen says of Liberty's December announcement.

Allen has stacks of information of the engineering college and the College of Business Administration, a copy of a speech in which Spanier praised Liberty and a handful of letters from UNL professors who protested Liberty's dismissal.

In a December letter to NU President Dennis Smith, Allen argued that Spanier should be dismissed, not Liberty. The letter questioned Spanier's honesty and qualifications.

"He just talks in circles," Allen says of Spanier, "makes no sense at all."

Most importantly, Allen maintains, Spanier does not represent the people of Nebraska. Spanier wants to be on "the cutting edge of social change." Nebraskans are conservative people, Allen says.

"If people were to vote on the way the university goes," he says, "They'd vote overwhelmingly against Graham."

Spanier responded to Allen's very public criticism in a letter.

"In this case you have gone beyond expressing a difference of opinion or a criticism; you have openly called into question my honesty and integrity, and I cannot stand by idly and allow you to do this without a response," Spanier wrote.

Spanier's letter defends Liberty's dismissal

and assures Allen that he is trying to serve his students, faculty, staff and constituents.

Allen now regrets writing the letter to Smith. All people saw, he says, is that a regent was trying to fire a chancellor. They didn't listen to his reasoning.

"That was dumb," he says of the letter.

He often recalls his mistakes that way. "That was dumb," he says, rolling his eyes and rocking his head back and forth. "I shouldn't have done that," he says, referring to a number of situations that have cast him in the spotlight in the past.

Almost always, he regrets the manner in which he handled these situations and not his intent. When he is criticized by others, too, it's almost always his manner they attack.

Controversial style

Most of his critics respect Allen's goals, but, they say, he goes about reaching them the wrong way. Dennis Mullen served on the Hastings City Council for four years while Allen was mayor. He was president of the group most of that time.

Mullen knows what it's like to fight with Bob Allen. Allen had a vision of what city government should be, Mullen says, and he did not want the council to get in his way.

"You may fault his style," Mullen says, "but I don't think you could criticize his mission."

When talking about Allen, people choose their words carefully. He is described as a hard worker, a determined and tenacious man, and a man with an uncanny ability to appeal to the common voter. Allen truly wants to do what is right for the people, they say.

"While they like to run me down, there's an element of respect," Allen says. "They know I'm trying to do what's right."

Mullen says Allen "absolutely believes he represents the electorate, and that the electorate understood where he wanted to take them when he ran."

But, Regent Blank argues, Allen doesn't consider the consequences of his words and actions before he speaks and acts.

"He tends to shoot from the hip," Blank says, "when he just doesn't think first."

Dr. Charles Wilson, a regent from Lincoln, has said that Allen stirs up controversy because he likes to be in the spotlight.

That infuriates Allen. He says he hates the attention.

"I despise the goddamn stuff," he says, pausing as he often does after he swears,

worrying because Georgene hates it.

"I hate having to be a part of something that's negative, but I don't back down."

Regent Nancy O'Brien of Waterloo, chairperson of the board, is, as Allen describes her, "no fan of mine." O'Brien wonders why some-

one who claims to hate the spotlight would find his way back there again and again.

"Since his behavior warrants that over and over," O'Brien says, "I find it hard to believe that it bothers him."

Allen says he has no choice. When he knows something is right, he can't back down.

"I've been through this before," Allen says. "It's lonely at the time, but I get a lot of calls of support."

His style may be troublesome, but Allen should not be ignored, Mullen says. He has a way of ferreting out problems.

"If Bob Allen is raising Cain and questioning," Mullen says, "well, where there's smoke, there might be fire."

How Allen goes about solving problems is what gets him into trouble, Mullen says. But, he says, those who've worked with Allen "have a whale of a respect for him."

Mullen had words of warning for Allen's future foes.

"Anyone who underestimates him is in for a rude awakening," he says.

Powers, who also served on the Hastings council, narrows that warning.

"Spanier's in trouble, I'll tell you that," he says, "because Bob is determined, and he won't give up. He has the tenacity of a bulldog."

But there's not much room in Allen's office for a new crusade. In November, he began his second six-year term as regent, his last political office. After that, he'll put politics behind him, maybe to write a book or two. Until then, he promises, he'll keep fighting, keep pushing for a better university. He might make a few mistakes and act dumb sometimes, but he won't back down.

Allen tucks Spanier's resume back into its file. His desk has lost its semblance of organization. A layer of copies covers its spilled piles. Educational reports, letters, magazine pages. A slice of key lime cheesecake from the bakery below waits for him to finish his thought.

"If you go for truth and accuracy, you're going to make some people unhappy," he says. "After this, it's someone else's turn."