



## The Voice of Ethics Podcast Transcript

### February 2026 Episode

### Nepotism Is Not a Love Language

Susan: Hello ethical people. I'm Susan Willeke of the Ohio Ethics Commission, welcoming you to The Voice of Ethics, the podcast where we dive into stories about ethics in government. This episode is coming to you just three days after Valentine's Day. So a belated happy day of love and merriment to you all.

So when I think of Valentine's Day gifts, some of the expected ones come to mind. Flowers, candy, chocolate in a heart shaped box, jewelry, maybe even specifically an engagement ring, right? If you have received any of these lovely items from the love of your life this week, congratulations and well done to your significant other. My husband and I always exchange cards on Valentine's Day, we make dinner together at home and if I'm being completely honest, are often beginning to doze off around 10 PM. Not sure if any of you can relate, but what can I say? We're not in our 20s anymore. Or our 30s... Or our 40s. Man, I'm beginning to depress myself so let's get on to this week's stories.

I'll bet one of the Valentine's Day gifts that has never occurred to any of you is: Valentine drumroll please: \*drumroll sound effect\* a public job! Yes, you heard that right! This week we have not one, not two, but three stories of people in public service using their public authority to either get a new job or a job promotion for their loved ones. So fasten your red or pink seatbelt, and let's tackle our first ever Valentine's episode.

\*harp sound effect\*

Our first story takes us to the City of Brotherly Love, Philadelphia. How could I not include a story in a Valentine's episode where the city's nickname contains the word "love," am I right? Anyway, I would like to introduce you to my friend Michael Cook, who is the general counsel for the Philadelphia Board of Ethics. I've known Michael for more than 15 years now, and while he has lots of great stories to tell, I asked him to share this specific nepotism tale as my Valentine gift to you. Michael, take it away.

Michael: We have a three-member board of elected officials who are responsible for overseeing elections in Philadelphia; all elections – federal, state, municipal - and they've had, you know, they have turnover from time to time- you know, new people come, new people go - and then the three commissioners elect their chair. There was a period a few years ago, where the chair changed, so the commissioner who had not been the commissioner was elected chair. And the chair has traditionally had a lot of administrative power over how the agency operates.

And it turns out that this particular commissioner, his younger brother was also an employee of the agency, working in the warehouse or a clerical position or something like that. And one of the very first things that the new chair did upon obtaining that role was to go about obtaining a raise for his brother. A promotion to a higher classification and a raise. Which was a violation of our conflict of interest rules because he was taking action that had a financial benefit for a family member.

He told a subordinate that he wanted to make the raise happen and to get it on the agenda for the next meeting of the commissioners and then when the item came up, he didn't vote on it, but his prior efforts were still official action.

When it blew up internally he tried to distance himself from it and countermand it and cover it up, which resulted in him having another ethics violation for failure to cooperate with our investigation. So, he ended up with two, uh, conflict of interest violations and one violation for failure to cooperate with our investigation.

Susan: Now I know Michael's story of the Elections Commission chairperson advocating to get his brother a raise and a promotion in his city job stands alone, but I did want to note one thing though as well. In Ohio we do have something known as settlement authority. The Ethics Commission can negotiate a settlement with the wrongdoer with mitigation correction measures instead of taking the case to a jury trial. The big caveat is that in order to be eligible for a settlement agreement, the person must be cooperative with our investigation. If they aren't, then they could be referred to a prosecutor.

If this story had happened in Ohio and that chairperson truly tried to dissuade people from cooperating with the investigation, he would not have been eligible for a settlement agreement in Ohio.

It's also worth noting that Michael described the steps the chairperson took to advocate for his brother behind the scenes, so I want to expand a bit more on the concept of recusal. At the Ethics Commission, we sometimes hear comments like, "Well, I didn't vote on it." And believe me, that's good. But that's not the only recusal requirement. If someone in public service participates in any way in their family member's hiring or a promotion, etc., that's a problem under the statute. Complete recusal is required.

\*harp sound effect\*

Our next "public job as a family gift" story actually comes to us from a waterworks department superintendent, or more accurately, I should probably call this story, the "public benefits for a family member."

This public waterworks superintendent wasn't accused of hiring his son, but he did directly supervise his son, a definite problem under the Ohio Ethics Law. But just like adding peanuts to chocolate candy makes it even better, I can make this story even better with a few more details. Not only was this guy his son's direct boss who supervised him day to day, directed his work assignments and approved his son's expense reimbursements for official travel, he took it a few steps further when he approved his son's salary increases and routinely gave his son work assignments that required overtime for more pay. So I think that story demonstrates that it's not just the initial hiring of our family members that we must abstain from, but any other actions that directly impact them. Check out our show notes for more information on this important part of the law.

\*harp sound effect\*

And because you never would just give someone two roses, but always three, this Valentine's episode would not have been complete without our third story.

For this final escapade into loving our family members right into illegal hiring situations, we're heading south to the Bluegrass State. I'd like to next give the mic to Katie Gabhart, the former executive director of the Kentucky Ethics Commission. I think you're going to love this story. You get it? Love? Valentine's Day? No? Anybody? All right, take it away, Katie.

Katie: He abused the ethics code in every way possible and made up a few new ways. We ended up charging him with 42 counts in violation of the Kentucky Ethics Code. He did things from hiring his girlfriend into a position and never making her work. When she left her computer had never been turned on. And from all accounts, the only thing she did was go to his house and make sandwiches for him and mop his floor.

\*harp sound effect\*

Susan: Dear listener, I'd like to believe that I am somewhat creative, but I do not think I'm inventive enough to even have come up with this story. And while it's sad that it happened - it's a definite betrayal to the public - it's good that their Ethics Commission was there to hold the wrongdoers accountable. So thank you, Katie, for your public service and for that unbelievable story.

Those are our stories for this Valentine's Week. I hope you found them interesting and enlightening. And again, be sure to check out our show notes for more information on the issues we discussed in this episode. And before we say au revoir our first ever Valentine's episode, I also wanted to note that this week is Random Acts of Kindness Week. It seems like the perfect episode to award our first ever True North Award.

The True North Award is a verbal recognition of people who demonstrate the best in ethics and integrity. While the majority of our work at the Ethics Commission relates to those in public service, in this podcast we want to occasionally acknowledge people from across all walks of life who have gone above and beyond in simply being a quality human being.

Our inaugural True North Award is hereby bestowed on a high school senior from Centerburg High School right here in Ohio. This young student, Lilly, recognized that students who are new can feel lost. I bet a lot of us can relate to that feeling, yes? Walking into that cafeteria, wondering where you're going to sit. Finding an empty table and desperately hoping that it won't be too challenging or too long before you make new friends. If any of you can remember that feeling, you will especially appreciate what Lilly started at her school.

She gathered a group of fellow students who would be willing to volunteer their time and compassion to reach out to students who seemed lost or lonely. To ensure that nobody in that building ever again has to walk into that proverbial cafeteria feeling lost and alone. And even as Lilly sets to graduate from high school this May she is already recruiting people to take on this effort when she's gone to ensure those efforts continue for future students. I think a lot of us can learn from a young woman like her. So hey Lilly, well done. Thank you for your integrity and your example. And never forget you're an ethics rock star.

With that, thank you, everyone, for being here today. Don't forget to join us in two weeks when we'll be celebrating Read Across America Week and Dr. Seuss's birthday. Until then, here's my Valentine Week gift to you. What did one octopus say to the other on Valentine's Day? Can I hold your hand hand hand hand hand hand hand hand? Ha! I love it. Take care everybody. Be ethical. Bye.