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6 months in, Hutchinson reflects on job

Governor takes part in interview series

By Emily Nitcher

This article was published today at 3:37 a.m.

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PHOTO BY BENJAMIN KRAIN
Gov. Asa Hutchinson speaks with journalist Deborah Robinson about his contributions to the past, present and future of the state during Conversations with Arkansas Governors, a public event held Sunday at the Ron Robinson Theater in Little Rock.

Gov. Asa Hutchinson reflected on his first six months in office in an hour-long interview Sunday, becoming the first sitting governor to participate in the Conversations with Arkansas Governors series.

The series aims to interview all the state's living past and present governors about their personal beliefs and have them reflect on their time in office. Hutchinson, who has been governor since January, answered questions from journalist Deborah Robinson onstage at the Ron Robinson Theater in Little Rock about the job, his family and challenges during his first six months in office.

Coming into office, Hutchinson said he wanted to accomplish two things on his first day: set the tone and call six out-of-state company executives to let them know Arkansas wanted their business.

"You set the tone," Hutchinson said. "This is our agenda, and we're going to go after it every day."

One of the items not on Hutchinson's agenda was the religious-protection bill, which the governor described on Sunday as coming toward the end of the legislative session in a rather "dramatic fashion."

Arkansas received national media attention in April when a bill advanced to the governor's desk that supporters said advanced religious freedom and opponents said allowed discrimination against gays. With intense interest from around the nation, the governor asked the Arkansas Legislature to revise the bill to mirror the language in the federal Religious Freedom Restoration Act.

The Legislature complied, and Hutchinson signed that compromise religious-protection bill into law.

"The challenge for us in Arkansas is that the majority of citizens, as expressed by their vote on the constitutional amendment, defines marriage as between one man and one woman," Hutchinson said. "That is the constitution of Arkansas, and it's not something you disregard with callousness or just because you want to go a different direction. So you have some strong-held

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believes that the people of Arkansas have versus their common-sense desire not to discriminate. We don't want to discriminate against anyone."

Reconciling both desires is a balancing act that continues not only in Arkansas, but throughout the nation, Hutchinson said.

When asked about his personal beliefs on gay marriage, the governor said he believes marriage should be between a man and a woman.

Sunday's interview also explored the governor's personal life. Asa and Susan Hutchinson have been married for 41 years and have four children and five grandchildren. The pair dated in college and reconnected when the governor was attending law school at the University of Arkansas and Susan Hutchinson was teaching school in Memphis.

The distance presented Gov. Hutchinson with a choice. He could either use his money to buy gas for his 1966 Plymouth Valiant to visit Susan or he could buy books and other things he needed for school. Hutchinson picked the books, but about every other weekend, he hitchhiked from Fayetteville to Memphis to see his future wife.

"It broke her heart having to drop me off there on the interstate," Hutchinson said.

When asked about the secret to 41 years of marriage, Hutchinson joked, "two cars," so both people can move at their own pace, before he provided a more serious answer.

"I think it's important for a couple to not just fall in love once, but fall in love regularly," he said. "That's happened in our marriage, and that's important."

Metro on 06/08/2015

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