

**Freedom Watch**  
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**Community Conversations: An interview with former Citizens Project Board member Sharon Berthrong**

By Ellie Collinson

Citizens Project wishes to thank Sharon for her many years of service to Citizens Project and the community in support of equal rights, individual freedoms, separation of church and state, civic engagement, and respect for diversity.

**Q: What made you first become active in our community?**

A: I moved here in the early '60s. I got involved with the Democratic Party as a precinct committee chair. I've always been interested in what is going on in the world, but I first had time to act on my passions when I moved to Colorado Springs. It was really nothing about this community in particular that made me want to get more active. There were only 75,000 people back then without much diversity to make the city polarized.

**Q: What inspires your civic work?**

A: I want to see a change, big-time change in this community. I'm tired of a certain element dictating how other people should think and feel. There was Amendment 2 in the early 1990s and Colorado for Family Values moved in - both those things set my hair on edge. I got a renewed fervor after Amendment 2 and TABOR passed. My problem is I have too many passions, but civil rights, equality, and the separation of church and state are the most important issues to me.

**Q: What is your vision of COS in 2015?**

A: I would love to see one big chamber of commerce, not one for every ethnic group and for women. I would like to see minorities (ethnic/racial and women) in half of our elected offices. I would also like to see minorities make as much money as white male executives and have a real voice in our community's leadership. Higher-education leadership is cognizant of what needs to happen to make this community more tolerant, but I'm not sure that they have the power to make the changes occur alone.

**Q: So how do we make these changes happen?**

A: All three higher education leaders need to speak out about concerns for the community. I'd like people to come out as Democrats and not be ostracized for that fact. I would like to see Democrats run and win nonpartisan races because they are good leaders, regardless of their party affiliation. Right now, the message of government is spun only one way. There is very little chance of convincing the general public to think in a new way or to be more tolerant of differences. How you get that message out is one on one; you must convey your passion for equality to others. We all need to speak out and not be afraid of having people ostracize us for our different visions of the community.

**Q: How do we overcome the challenges to articulating commonality in such a polarized environment in our community?**

A: It's hard to talk about issues unless you talk without labels. I've made inroads with a lot of people by talking one on one. I'd like to see Citizens Project become much more visible and that message much more visible. The message should not be couched in liberal or conservative terms, but in terms of equal treatment for people.

**Q: What are some of the challenges of the Pikes Peak area to diversity and inclusion?**

A: I'd like to see much more inclusion of ethnic minorities and not having simply token

representation for leadership, particularly on nonprofit boards. I remember an instance where I was attending a workshop on diversity with a board I served on and the trainer later said to me, "Sharon, you are never going to be diverse with this group because you never come into our community. We cannot keep coming into your community." I think Caucasians need to join the NAACP, join the Urban League, and support the African American community in a tangible way if we are to begin to develop relationships with people outside of our circle of known white leadership in town. The same holds true for other ethnic and racial groups in the community.

**Q: What is it like to be an atheist in this town?**

A: People have actually jumped off the curb when I tell them I don't believe in god. If I were a timid person, I'd keep my mouth shut, but I am an outspoken person and I have a right to my beliefs. I believe if they only knew what being a humanist is about, they'd be more accepting.

**Q: Lately, the subject of moral values has been heavily debated. How do we develop a value of interdependence and a recognition of how our lives impact others in this community?**

A: If I tell you how I really feel about it, I'm as bad as they are, because I am saying I am right and they are wrong and I don't want that. I want this sense to come from people's gut, not from some kind of religious teaching or some moral code that tells people what to think or feel. I think values have to come from your home life, and people can see that you are a caring, good person and they don't want to disappoint you. I think the bottom line is everybody is out there by themselves and anything we can do to make them feel included in the world, our world, their world, the whole community, the better off the community is going to be. I also live by my own motto: Forgive no error you recognize.

You are not living by someone else's rules, but your own, your personal responsibility. It helps you go above and beyond the expectations.

**Q: Maybe then we can say institutions reinforce the good values people ought to have, regardless of religious beliefs:**

A: I think that's probably right. I don't know what they talk about in church, but my mother went to the Catholic Church until she died. That church reinforced that gay people are bad. Rather than just sending negative messages, churches could be planting ideas of inclusiveness and help for people. But it seems to me it is all about negative thinking, that the church is not including a certain group or individual because they don't think the same way as other people and it reinforces the "I am right and you are wrong" theme.

**Q: People in this community are united in simply recognizing there is a problem, there is a commonality there, but how can we extend that understanding to better dialogue between groups of people?**

A: On a human level, rather than a religious level or a political level, if we could just make people familiar with our lives it would make a difference.

**Q: How do citizens of this region hold our elected officials more accountable?**

A: I think organizations like Citizens Project, Citizens for Responsible County Government, and League of Women Voters are doing this. Attending meetings and demanding that everyone gets an equal voice is crucial. I'm not sure that it works, but we must keep doing it. We must be willing to appear at meetings and take a stance and be willing to fight for it. We as people and the organizations we support must keep the dialogue open.

**Q: How do you communicate to the person who is generally disappointed with the leadership in our community but isn't doing anything about it yet, because maybe they are too busy or apathetic or afraid?**

A: I say, join the Colorado Women's Agenda! Further, I would encourage people to write letters to the editors of our papers. We also need to give people information and help them let go of their anger and provide a vehicle to speak to their public officials, not just letters to the editor. Maybe

we should be encouraging the Board of County Commissioners to host town meetings to give citizens a forum to speak.

**Q: What element makes you proud to live in Colorado Springs?**

A: I cofounded with some other women a political group for women called Artemis. We discussed how little participation we saw among women in the community. Women need to have more leadership in this community. Our plan is to increase voting among women and to develop future leadership in order to change the face of this community. We want to help them understand what is going on politically and how to make this community more tolerant and inclusive. The success of Artemis has renewed my faith in our future.

## **City Charter Anti-discrimination policy**

by Nicole Beauvais

In April the citizens of Colorado Springs will see several ballot issues concerning the city charter. One of these issues was going to address the addition of several categories to the city's current antidiscrimination policy. Currently the policy states that the city will not discriminate against people due to their race, age, or political or religious affiliation. The committee reviewing the charter suggested the addition of gender, disability, country of origin, and sexual orientation. While City Council agreed there is a need for revising the policy, it has been hesitant to include the term "sexual orientation" and has questioned the feasibility of getting the measure passed by the citizens of Colorado Springs.

In order to sidestep this problem, some members of Council felt that the entire wording of the policy should be changed. Their suggestion was to eliminate the listing of specific protected-class categories altogether, and create a new policy simply stating that no one will be discriminated against in employment practices. This suggestion for the charter was voted down at the January 24th council meeting because the council couldn't agree on the appropriate wording to appear on the ballot.

Opponents of the suggested revision argued that having an open-ended statement (that says that no one would be discriminated against) allows every type of discrimination to be argued. City Attorney Patricia Kelly advised Council that the suggested revision would make firing an employee due to poor work performance discriminatory, even though it is a legitimate cause of job termination. The council considered several ways to deal with the wording of the proposed charter revision but could not come to an agreement on what would be best. This leaves the issue off the ballot and the antidiscrimination policy still lacking several important categories.

Vice Mayor and gay and lesbian rights advocate, Richard Skorman, said of the action of Council on Monday, "I am in favor of adding the actual words (referring to "sexual orientation") but it didn't have the support in Council ... I personally think it would have passed with the specific categories." In reflecting on the council's agreement that the new wording of the policy was too ambiguous to fully protect the rights of people who may be fired for illegitimate reasons like sexual orientation as opposed to poor work performance, Skorman added "The wording would cover everyone but might be taken too far." Skorman went on to say that "The issue should be an internal employment policy, not a charter issue."

Although the council was unable to come to a conclusion on the issue in time for a vote this April, citizens may also sponsor a change to the charter through a petition initiative. A representative for the City Clerk's office said, "Either way, when the charter needs to be changed it, has to be of the

people: if the council wants to change something they have to have an election; if the citizens want to change something they have to have an election." The council didn't propose a change to the city's anti-discrimination policy this time, but the citizens still can propose a change by undertaking an initiative.

*Despite the omission of a proposed revision on the ballot this election, Citizens Project will continue to work with the new city council in May to realize needed changes to the antidiscrimination policy of the city and the equal treatment of its current employees.*

## **Judge defers decision in Palmer GSA case**

by Ellie Collinson

On Wednesday February 2, lawyers issued closing arguments to Judge Robert Matsch regarding a request for a preliminary injunction that would require School District 11 to recognize the Palmer High School Gay Straight Alliance as a school-sponsored club. After hearing each side's remarks, Judge Matsch retired to his chambers stating that he will render his decision at a later, unknown date. "We were pleased that the judge was well-read about the case; he asked good hard questions and really engaged with the issues of the case. We look forward to his decision," said the plaintiff's counsel Alfred McDonnell.

Responding to the original lawsuit that six students and their families filed when the GSA's application for school sponsorship was denied, District 11 created a two-tiered system of classification for student clubs in June of 2004. The GSA club, along with 8 other clubs at Palmer and 21 other groups in the district, became reclassified as an "independent" club, as opposed to a school-sponsored group that evidences a tie to a school's curriculum. Other groups reclassified as independent include chess, science fiction, mountain biking, and various dance clubs. "I believe it is important to keep our students involved in our schools and for the district to create policies that support their interests in creating clubs," says Karen Teja, a school board member in District 11. With those concerns, Teja does not support the two-tiered policy.

Independent clubs at Palmer and elsewhere in District 11 may not use a school's public address system, are not pictured in yearbooks, and are only permitted to post fliers on one specific bulletin board on the school's grounds. In addition, independent clubs may not keep bank accounts with the school, and neither faculty nor staff may receive remuneration for supervising or advising the club's activities.

The California-based group Gay-Straight Alliance Network, which empowers youth in over 450 GSAs across that state fighting homophobia and transphobia in schools, opposes the two-tiered policy: "GSA clubs should actually be embraced by school districts, not relegated to the bottom tier of a two-tier system. Studies conducted in California have found strong correlations between GSA clubs and safer school climates because they ensure that all students feel safe and welcomed at school," says Carolyn Laub, Executive Director. Laub believes the practice is discriminatory: "What's troubling about this case is that by introducing the two-tiered policy in response to students' attempts to start a GSA, the district is sending a clear message that it doesn't intend to treat LGBT students and their allies equally. That's the fundamental issue at hand here - LGBT students deserve to be treated fairly and equally, especially when they are facing a hostile climate at school."

In the closing arguments of the case, Mr. McDonnell claimed that the two-tiered system establishes preferential treatment for curriculum-based clubs over the newly reclassified

independent groups. McDonnell further argued that the basis for determining a club's curricular tie is flawed, thereby not fulfilling the District's burden of proof that it has upheld its own policy. The three clubs the prosecution used as examples of questionably curriculum-based groups were: On the Table, a current events discussion group; Masques and Sandals, a technical theater club; and the International Diversity Council, founded from the International Baccalaureate program housed at Palmer.

Eric Bentley, counsel for the defense of the district, responded by referencing the testimony of Palmer's principal Karin Reynolds in providing grounds for two of the groups' links to curriculum. Upon hearing the reasoning that Bentley provided, Judge Matsch asked him if the same logic could then be applied to the formation of a GSA as related to curriculum as well. Neither counsel could provide a basis for such a correlation.

Back in February of 2004, Citizens Project reported on the original grounds of the Palmer GSA case. At that time, District 11 had not issued the two-tiered policy and the basis of the suit planned to claim noncompliance with the Federal Equal Access Act of 1984. During his remarks, McDonnell asked Judge Matsch to recognize the circumstances of the initial lawsuit. In response, Bentley claimed that the district's new policy has brought Palmer High School into compliance with the Federal Equal Access Act. Both parties referred to the Supreme Court case of *The Board of Education of Westside Community Schools vs. Mergens* 496 U.S. 226 (1990) as representing the intent of the Equal Access Act as it relates to high school clubs. Judge Matsch questioned both attorneys about how their arguments reflected the intent of that case's ruling, specifically asking about the wording used by the judges. Judge Matsch has delayed his decision pending his further review of the Mergens case and other briefings supplied by both the defense and the prosecution.

*For the past year, Citizens Project has been working with concerned members of the District 11 community, including the plaintiffs and their parents, to support the existence of the Palmer GSA. Regardless of when and how the judge rules, this and similar efforts in local schools will continue. If you are interested in getting involved with this issue, please contact our office.*

## **Citizens Project welcomes new executive director**

by Board Chair, Greg Varner

I am excited to introduce our new Executive Director Ellie Collinson, who started January 3rd. She is actually returning to us, having worked for CP for a short time in 2001 as Program Director. Ellie brings us her wealth of experience in the community. She served on State Representative Michael Merrifield's campaign staff, in Colorado College's Development Office as a researcher, and as both the Vice President of the Board and the Program Facilitator of the Pikes Peak Gay and Lesbian Community Center. She graduated from Colorado College in 2002 and is doing course work in UCCS's Graduate School of Public Affairs.

"It was a very competitive hiring process," says Margi Duncombe, a CP board member who served on the search committee. "We are especially impressed with Ellie's ideas for increasing CP's outreach in the community and are delighted to welcome her aboard."