
THE PRAIRIE PROGRESSIVE



a newsletter for Iowa's Democratic Left

Winter 2019

Activist teachers build community

Gustavo spreads his arms wide and says, “Estudien con ganas porque esto no tiene precio,” or “Study with enthusiasm, because this is priceless.” He clarifies that by “this” he is referring not just to United States citizenship, which he has recently earned, but also the community gathered in the cafeteria at West Liberty Elementary. The diverse gathering consists mostly of Latino residents and their children. There is also a dozen or so volunteers who help teach the content of the citizenship test and enough English language skills to navigate the naturalization interview. We celebrate Gustavo’s accomplishment with thick slices of almost-too-sweet tres leches cake.

The citizenship classes meet on Thursday nights, are free, and include childcare and financial assistance for the application fee. UI College of Education’s Carolyn Colvin and West Liberty Middle School history teacher Dan Stevenson organized the classes as a direct response to the Trump Administration’s efforts to intimidate immigrants through actions and rhetoric. So far, the classes have helped 10 people become citizens and dozens forge new friendships.

The initial appeal of volunteering back in 2017 was the thought of

helping new citizens vote Trump out of office in 2020. In addition to sweet retribution, I had a sense that working with the local immigrant community could be an opportunity for much-needed healing. I had begun to feel that I couldn’t trust my country, that the party with the trifecta of power at both the state and federal level had a definition of American too small to include me. My father is an immigrant from Argentina, so the presidential name-calling felt personal. Volunteering reminded me why people want to be part of this country. It also showed me that we have the power to build the communities we want to live in, one relationship at a time.

Lauren, my wife, had already led a couple classes in West Liberty before she encouraged me to join. She had been paired with a group of women with very low language fluency and she thought that with the Spanish I’d learned from my father, I could be a much-needed bridge between her and the students. As we built a rapport, they became more comfortable advocating for themselves, shaping the classes to whatever they needed in that moment.

Our first interactions with our study group were imperfect and awkward, but our students are generous and deft at using humor to ease all of

our shortcomings. With time, our sessions have become more and more fun. We drill exam questions, but we also crack up at inside jokes, support each other through setbacks, navigate (sometimes hilarious, sometimes uncomfortable) language barriers, and ride out the thrills of making teaching and learning breakthroughs.

To achieve citizenship, our students must pass an oral interview that tests basic English skills, including reading and writing, and knowledge of a relatively arbitrary set of 100 questions about American geography, history, and civics (Q: What is one important thing Abraham Lincoln did? A: Freed the slaves). They will also have to verify the answers on their application form (How many children have been born to you? How many trips outside the U.S. have you taken in the last 5 years? Have you ever been a habitual drunkard?).

Now that we have worked with our students for a couple years, we’ve been to each other’s houses, met family members, and learned there is no refusing food gifts of homemade delicacies like pupusas and chiles rellenos. Two of our students’ tests are coming up soon, and we became a little emotional after our final study session. But they comforted us,

saying, “This isn’t the end! We’ll see you at my daughter’s birthday party, and we have to keep coming to class to keep learning English.”

Activism sparked by the 2016 election has taken many forms. For me, these classes are a very rewarding and tangible form of

activism. People that may otherwise be segregated have come together, razing assumptions about each other and building relationships. We’ve battled some of the hurt and distrust generated by the current administration. A couple dozen people have been empowered to apply for citizenship and been given

the tools to navigate the process. By 2020, we’ll have gained a handful of new and motivated voters who have the power to make their voices heard.

—Clarity Guerra lives in Iowa City and commutes to West Liberty

Proud to be a coal miner’s daughter?

The elections of 2018 were a disaster for the Democratic Party of Iowa at the state level. Republicans retained all three branches of government, and even increased their majority in the state senate. How did this happen?

At the federal level, Democrats flipped our house delegation from 3-1 Republican to 3-1 Democratic with the defeat of two male Republican incumbents by two young women, Cindy Axne and Abby Finkenauer. A number of commentators have noted that Finkenauer ran well ahead of losing Democratic gubernatorial candidate Fred Hubbell in Democratic strongholds in her district. Democrats who are pondering which candidate to support in the presidential caucuses would do well to consider the contrast between Finkenauer’s electoral success and Hubbell’s electoral failure.

Finkenauer campaigned on her working class background, bringing to mind Loretta Lynn’s classic “Proud to be a Coal Miner’s Daughter.” There are no coal miners in her district, but she made it clear in her television ads that she was proud to be the daughter of a union construction worker, and she put representatives of the Dubuque Building Trades Council in her ads. She explained that she first decided to run when, as a state legislator, she saw Iowa Republicans dismantle Iowa’s collective bargaining law.

It was important to be proud of who she is, but even more important was her answer to the eternal question in politics: which side are you on? Hundreds of thousands of working class Iowans are working for low wages, unable to afford Obamacare or qualify for Medicaid, and burdened with too much student debt to return to college and upgrade their job skills. Bernie Sanders has transformed the Democratic Party by setting out a working class political agenda: a \$15 an hour minimum wage, Medicare for all, free college tuition, and a trillion dollar green public works jobs program. Sanders attracted more caucus attendees than Hillary Clinton because he addressed the concerns of working class Iowans. Finkenauer embraced at least some of the Sanders agenda. She campaigned in favor of expanding access to health care with a public option for all Iowans under Medicare, and a \$15 an hour minimum wage.

Fred Hubbell, of course, could not help being part of the Des Moines business elite rather than the son of a coal miner, or a union welder, but he could have made it clear which side he was on. He failed to do as far as addressing working class concerns. His two core issues were re-funding Planned Parenthood and de-privatizing Medicaid. They are both good ideas, but neither would greatly expand access to health care for working class Iowans. He opposed a \$15 an hour state minimum wage and

entirely ignored the issue of student debt. He attacked tax credits for big corporations, a remote issue for most voters, but had nothing to say about direct job creation or eliminating tuition at our community colleges.

Hubbell was caught completely off guard, with nothing to say in response, when Republicans launched a devastating TV and radio ad campaign portraying him as a wealthy Des Moines oligarch, not only out of touch with the working class, but someone who had enriched himself by laying off workers.

In the contested Democratic primary Hubbell received 55% of the vote statewide and 44% even in the People’s Republic of Johnson County. Presumably these Democratic voters thought that he would be the most electable candidate against Kim Reynolds. When considering candidates to run against Donald Trump, Iowa Democrats should think again.

If we are to carry Pennsylvania, Michigan, Wisconsin, and Iowa this time around, as well as those southern states that Obama carried, we should support candidates who, if not Bernie Sanders himself, support the Sanders quadrilateral: Medicare for all, a \$15 an hour minimum wage, free higher education, and a Green New Deal jobs program.

—Jeff Cox

Who's the Boss?

When my son was twelve, he noticed that a city police car had changed the traditional emblem and it no longer stated: "To Serve and Protect." He asked the cop, "Why the change?" Smirking at the cheeky kid, the police officer replied, "We don't do that anymore."

It seems the term public servant causes a negative reaction, since the word "servant" generates a dark cloud from our country's past, when human beings were bought, sold, and treated like livestock. So we've attempted to erase it by tearing down antique statues that some view as glorifying these past atrocities. Terms like White Supremacist create a strong emotional reaction as it chips away at our desire to deny the past and ignore the current racial unrest. Career shock jocks like Rep. Steve King thoughtlessly and callously spew this hated reminder of our checkered past to feed an almost pathological need for media attention.

For better or worse, King's outrageous remarks put Iowa on the map. People who don't even know their own state's congressional representatives know Rep. Steve King. His remarks are designed for strong responses. The media loves him. He gives fodder to late night comedians, and he provides gossip lovers a desire to purchase a particular publication, because the headline is just too juicy.

But most importantly, King's constituents love him. He not only wins elections, he wins by landslides term after term. That is, until the last election. He was still elected, but by a much smaller margin. So his Republican cohorts turned on him like a wolf pack on an aging and weakened alpha male. King's seat is now potentially in jeopardy and

his outlandish snippets, although tolerated for years, have suddenly become distasteful and unacceptable. Maybe Republicans just feel that they have their hands full with a president that produces more daily tweets than Tweety Bird and can out-shock the shock jock with his daily snipes.

The House Republicans punished King by stripping him of his committees, most notably his membership on agriculture. But who is really being punished? King, or his loyal constituents who voted him into office, thereby hiring him to represent their interests in D.C.? A massive red flag should be flying for Iowans regarding this new disturbing

The House Republicans punished King...but who is really being punished?

policy of stripping constituents of their representation at not only the federal level but also the state level, where Democratic Iowa Senator Nate Boulton was given no committee assignments until the night before the start of the current legislative session.

Boulton ended his gubernatorial bid due to accusations of unwanted sexual acts when he was intoxicated, which occurred before he ran for the Senate. Given the increasing number of sexual scandals at the Iowa Capitol, and fueled by the #MeToo movement, Senate Minority Leader Janet Petersen asked for Boulton's resignation. He refused. Boulton's accuser recently filed an ethics complaint against him, which had no merit, since the alleged incident happened before he was in office. Petersen used the complaint to strip Boulton of his committee

assignments, notably Judiciary and Labor & Business Relations. He was well-qualified to serve on these committees, being an attorney who practices in workers compensation, personal injury, and labor law. Since his district serves constituents with strong interests in labor issues, the committee assignments served his constituents' needs well. When the ethics complaint was tossed out, Petersen eventually assigned him to different committees, thus effectively punishing Boulton's constituents and potentially damaging his political career.

It's imperative to anticipate where this policy of stripping away committee assignments to punish legislators could lead. Will it become commonplace to strip a legislator's job responsibilities when he or she says something the party doesn't like, or isn't grounded in good Christian values? Republican and Democratic leaders continue to view legislative members as party or caucus servants, instead of respecting the legislators' elected Constitutional responsibility of public service. Using committee work as a means to control or manipulate individual legislators is both dishonorable and extremely dangerous. The political caucus should not be determining what should or should not be said to the public. It is the responsibility of the voters to determine who should represent them and when their service is no longer desirable.

—Stephanie Fawkes-Lee is a concerned constituent

A heavy burden on Iowa families

Ten states now regulate marijuana like beer and liquor. In November, Michigan voters approved legal sales of marijuana to adults. The newly elected Governors of both Minnesota and Illinois want to do the same.

Iowa should follow their lead. Marijuana prohibition hasn't worked and has hurt taxpayers and everyday Iowans.

Despite the best efforts of the criminal justice system to protect us from this overly exaggerated threat and the hundreds of millions spent on police, courts, jails, and prisons, Iowans are not safer or healthier.

By legalizing and regulating the sale of marijuana to Iowa adults, we can refocus our criminal justice system on serious crime and expand substance abuse treatment programs.

We can also capture our state's share of the jobs, revenue, and commerce created by regulating marijuana like recreational alcohol.

It's time to face facts. In Iowa, marijuana is available to about anyone that seeks it out. Iowans objectively know that it's less toxic, less addictive, and less lethal than the recreational alcohol that is available at every HyVee, Casey's, and Kum and Go.

Iowa's continued criminalization of marijuana imposes a heavy burden on Iowa families in the form of lost jobs, legal bills, jail time, broken families, violence, and crime. Why should we keep spending millions and millions each year to arrest, prosecute, jail, and punish thousands of Iowans for possessing a substance less harmful than legal recreational alcohol?

I'm not naïve. As with the legalization of beer and liquor, marijuana legalization will bring its own set of challenges.

One major concern is the use of marijuana by teenagers. Like smoking cigarettes or drinking alcohol, using marijuana is bad for their health and social development. That's why, teen use of marijuana must be aggressively discouraged and prevented.

Other states have done this successfully. After moving from marijuana prohibition to marijuana regulation, government surveys indicate that teen marijuana use has not increased.

It is time for Iowans, and the Iowa Legislature, to take a hard, clear look at what Iowa's marijuana prohibition has accomplished.

Despite marijuana prohibition, Iowa has a working underground market for marijuana. Just like with illegal alcohol in the 1930s, Iowa's illegal underground marijuana market is profitable, unregulated, untaxed, and supplying its customers.

The enforcement of marijuana prohibition has been grossly unequal. Even though Black and White Iowans use marijuana at the same rate, Black Iowans are four times more likely to be arrested for marijuana possession. A law that cannot be equally enforced is blatantly unfair and erodes trust in our justice system.

Opioid epidemic! This headline, in various forms, has been splashed across the national news frequently in the last few years. Our nation indeed has serious problems with addiction to many kinds of opioids; fortunately, these problems are being treated as public health rather than criminal issues. It is fair to conclude that this smarter, more compassionate treatment of opioid abuse is related to demographics. Opioid abusers and addicts are more often white and middle or upper class. They

are not four times more likely to be arrested for possession of opioids, as black Iowans are for possession of marijuana. Marijuana is also less likely than opioids to be linked to violent crime. A law that cannot be equally enforced is a bad law.

Early reports from states with legal marijuana show a decrease in opioid abuse.

The prohibition price tag is enormous. Over the decades Iowans have spent hundreds of millions on marijuana prohibition. In 2018, Iowa taxpayers paid \$12 million to enforce 5,200 marijuana possession violations.

It's time to end Iowa's failed, unfair, costly history of marijuana prohibition.

We should replace Iowa's criminal marijuana underground market with one that is well-regulated. Estimates project that state regulation and taxation of the legal sale of marijuana will create 4,000-7,000 new jobs across Iowa and generate between \$40-\$70 million in new state and local revenue.

Those new resources can help us respond with effective treatment for the abuse of marijuana, alcohol, other drugs, and tobacco. New revenue can also be used for urgently needed new investments in early, healthy childhood development and child care assistance.

As the Midwest moves forward to regulate marijuana use for adults, Iowans will need to decide if we will continue wasting money and destroying lives on failed prohibition, or if we will learn lessons from other states and capture our share of jobs, revenue, and commerce by regulating marijuana like recreational alcohol.

—Joe Bolcom is a State Senator from Iowa City

Who is a victim?

How much do you think it would cost to amend the Iowa Constitution? To fund an amendment to the U.S. Constitution? Or, the constitutions of all 50 states? What staggering amount would you have to cough up to amend all fifty-one constitutions? We're about to find out.

An attempt to amend all state constitutions, as well as the federal constitution, to include the rights of victims is a goal of billionaire Dr. Henry T. Nicholas.

Known as Marsy's Law, the proposal is named for a California resident, Nicholas' sister Marsalee, who was stalked and murdered by her ex-boyfriend and neighbor. Marsy's mother and brother walked into a grocery store one week after the slaying and were confronted by the accused murderer. The family had no idea that the accused had been released on \$100,000 bail.

Amending the Iowa Constitution, or any constitution for that matter, is serious business, not to be taken lightly. An amendment to a constitution should not be controversial, or at the least, it should have minimal or token opposition. Adopting Marsy's Law as a constitutional amendment is highly controversial.

Governor Kim Reynolds indicated in her Condition of the State address that she will call "for a constitutional amendment enshrining victims' right in the state's constitution."

Currently, voters in a dozen states have approved constitutional amendments to adopt some form of Marsy's Law. However, the Montana Supreme Court struck down its version of Marsy's Law as "void in its entirety" because when "voters were

required to vote 'yes' or 'no' for (the amendment) in its entirety, they were forced to vote for or against multiple, not closely related, changes to the Montana Constitution with one vote." It's that statement that has many organizations, including the ACLU, the Iowa Coalition Against Sexual Assault, the Iowa Coalition Against Domestic Violence, and dozens of newspaper editorial boards (including the NY Times), strongly opposing this measure.

The Marsy's Law movement originated in California with Proposition 33 in 2008. The California initiative includes 17 rights in the judicial process, "including the right to legal standing, protection from the defendant, notification of all court proceedings, and restitution, as well as granting parole boards far greater powers to deny inmates parole." Those rights are codified in Iowa Code Chapter 915. However, the proposed amendment goes far beyond that.

Proponents in Iowa cite two reasons for their support. First, they claim that those rights in Chapter 915 can go away, easily. They envision a gutting of victims' rights provisions in Chapter 915 and therefore the need to enshrine the rights into the constitution. That's a nonexistent probability. What group of legislators would commit political suicide by denying victims the rights already statutorily provided? Next, proponents say victims should have rights equal to those guaranteed to defendants. But that's not what they are seeking. The current proposals give victims the right not to be deposed (among other amenities) -- rights no criminal defendant has, nor should have.

Every constitutional right is available to all citizens, and those rights protect

the citizenry from the government and the government alone. Marsy's Law protects one citizen from another. Further, the concept of equating rights to protect one from the government as compared/opposed to protecting one from another crosses the line between civil and criminal laws. Due process is a right proffered by constitutional law. Due process is not a component of civil law.

A Montana county attorney explained that Marsy's Law was well-intended, but aside from depriving Montana voters "of the ability to consider the many, separate ways it changed Montana's constitution," it failed to "explain the significant administrative, financial, and compliance burdens its unfunded mandates imposed upon state, county, and local governments, while jeopardizing the existing rights of everyone involved with the criminal judicial system."

The administrative, financial, and compliance burdens are exactly what has led some South Dakota legislators to consider repealing the constitutional amendment. South Dakota, the first state after California to enact Marsy's Law, has experienced high costs in administering the provisions of the law, and in some cases, the law intended to protect victims has actually hampered investigations. Legislators are promising to add statutory rights for victims before calling for a total repeal. Those statutory rights offered are the same as Iowa has provided for years.

There is also the problem with the word "victim." Who is and who is not a victim? A former Iowa prosecutor training coordinator once said that "there are no victimless crimes." That can be interpreted as saying that when an Iowa county attorney prosecutes

a defendant, that county attorney is prosecuting on behalf of the state. The State is the people of Iowa. We are all victims of the crime. The court heading in a criminal matter is always: “State v. ____.”

A good Democrat wanted a representative of Marsy’s Law to speak at a county central committee meeting. He insisted that the issue is non-partisan. It is. That’s why it shouldn’t be discussed at a partisan

party function. It shouldn’t be discussed by Iowa legislators, either. Money should not be able to buy constitutional amendments.

—Marty Ryan is a retired lobbyist and is much happier

Flip It fights flabby jellyfish

In the 19th century, the president of the University of Georgia conducted a study of civic engagement in which he found Americans in small towns were so enthusiastic about participating in associations that “every man, woman, and child (above ten years of age) in the place held an office—with the exception of a few scores of flabby, jellyfish characters.”

In more recent times, the number of flabby jellyfish characters has been on the rise, though generally under the more delicately phrased category of “those who seldom or never participated in community activities such as sports teams, book clubs, parent-teacher associations, or neighborhood associations.” 54% of Trump’s primary supporters fell into this category, higher than the percentage for any other primary candidate (The Atlantic, April 2016). It is difficult, looking at the strongman politics of Trump and his followers, not to draw the conclusion that if we as a society don’t get back into the practice of small-scale democracy-ing, we are in trouble of losing our democracy altogether.

In the year following his election, I didn’t see how I could make any difference. Underemployed but working long days, neither time nor money were resources I had to offer, at least not on the level that it seemed would make any difference. I still felt like an outsider after just a few years of living in Iowa, so I

didn’t have significant networks to call to action. However, I had a friendly colleague who had just invited me to join her neighborhood group that was in the process of brainstorming some kind of political action, so I took her up on the offer.

It became clear that my new friends were equally dedicated to trying to reverse the tide of jellyfish. After a year of making seemingly fruitless phone calls to Joni Ernst, Chuck Grassley, and Kim Reynolds, we wondered what we could do to activate more people and rebuild activist networks. Although none of us had never done anything like it before, together we began to strategize and make a plan. Inspired by similar movements such as Flippable, Sister District, Swing Left, and Adopt-a-State, Flip It Iowa was born with the goal of taking back the Iowa House of Representatives.

Our plan was to redirect money and human-power from safe blue areas of the state and into those districts that needed more help. We just needed to flip ten seats to take back Democratic control.

The model was simple. A team of people chooses a candidate in a flippable district, as determined by a number of factors. They chat with the candidate about their needs and district, then organize a house party. Each team member reaches out to everyone in their social network and asks for a donation of at least

\$25. Then at the party, the candidate gives their pitch, answers questions, and talks with guests, including experienced electeds.

From the first house party on December 16th for Eric Gierde, a candidate in HD 67, momentum and a sense of community grew. Over the course of this last year, Flip It Iowa teams hosted nearly 50 house parties, raising a total of \$130,000 for Democratic challengers. Volunteers from Iowa City knocked more than 5,000 doors in flippable districts.


Our efforts did not entirely yield the desired results, as we were unable to flip the House. While in some ways it was difficult to see past that disappointment, the fact remains that Flip It Iowa provided a venue for over 800 people across the state to practice democracy. Through our organizing and events, we wove neighbors, legislators and distant cities together to be stronger and more actively engaged in state politics. We provided education on how to throw an event, how to ask for donations, how to talk to politicians, and how to flex our citizen muscles. By bringing candidates from across the state to Johnson County, to Dubuque, to Ames and Des Moines, we learned what it really means to be a “big tent” party, honoring the ideological diversity within the party that isn’t always as evident from within those deep blue bastions.

On a personal level, I learned that it took so many specialized skills that everyone could play a role, even me. While I couldn't contribute as much financially, I could contribute my experience and knowledge with social media and event planning. I designed our logo and helped build an online following. I could knock doors or make calls for a few hours a week. Over time, my network grew too, one house party at a time.

Practicing democracy in local organizations means building infrastructure as well as habits. It's about developing those mental habits of deliberating, cooperating, compromising, and forging relationships. It is the ability to disagree vehemently on policy and then chat over coffee about the last Hawkeye game. It's knocking on doors, making phone calls, and engaging strangers in conversation.

And it's about taking responsibility for outcomes and realizing no one alone will (or should) solve the issues we face in our communities, our state, our country. It is about fighting that flabby jellyfish tendency, so that we are all empowered to take action.

—Lauren Darby is a teacher and an Iowa transplant



February 3, 2020
Iowa caucuses

Feb 9, 1944
Alice Walker was born

March 2
Crisis Center annual pancake breakfast - Iowa City

March 8
International Women's Day

March 18, 1969
US began unannounced bombing of Cambodia

April 3, 2009
Iowa Supreme Court ruled that denying same-sex couples the right to marry is unconstitutional

April 17, 1824
Slavery was abolished in Central America

May 3, 1919
Pete Seeger was born

“There’s no limit to how complicated things can get, on account of one thing always leading to another.”

—E.B. White

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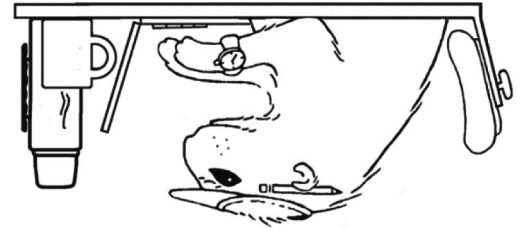
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