

# THE PRAIRIE PROGRESSIVE



January 2013

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*A NEWSLETTER FOR IOWA'S DEMOCRATIC LEFT*

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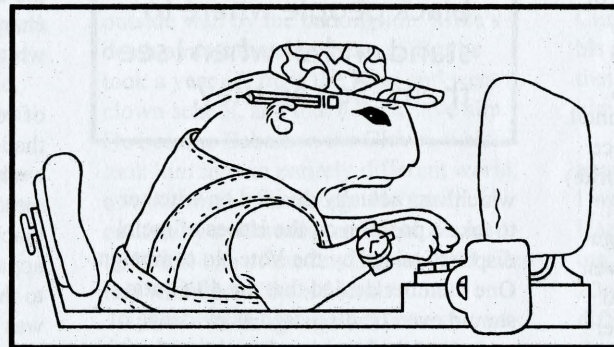
## Questioning the Narrative: Prairie Dog's Honor Roll

Two weeks before the last election, Iowa Senator Mike Gronstal informed Iowa Representative **Nate Willems** that Willems' poll numbers were very low in his campaign for a rural Senate seat. So low, in fact that Gronstal felt compelled to cut off Democratic Party funding for Willems' race in a district with a Republican voter registration advantage. Willems pushed on without party support and won over 49% of the vote against a well-funded farmer from Delaware County.

The Iowa Legislature will be missing a strong voice for working people. It was Willems who found the votes in the waning hours of the 2009 legislative session to stop insurance companies from instituting a "deny benefits now, ask questions later" policy for injured employees. Willems was a leading advocate in the Iowa Legislature for funding for Iowa Legal Aid Services, for year-round schools, for increased access to advanced placement courses, and for allowing mothers unpaid time in the workplace to pump breast milk.

A \$139,000,000 golf course/hotel/waterpark near McGregor sounded good to a group of developers, especially when sweetened with a Vision Iowa grant and county tax increment

financing to ease the risk. Up stepped **Concerned Citizens of Clayton County**, led by local farmers and their intrepid attorney, **Wallace Taylor** of Cedar Rapids. The grassroots group discovered a



history of poor management and environmental infractions by the developers, leading to lawsuits and penalties by the Attorney-General's Office and the Department of Natural Resources. They also discovered that an earlier project by the developers in a central Wisconsin community fell short of its sales pitch, leaving behind a TIF district classified as "severely distressed." After a nearly ten-year battle, Concerned Citizens and Taylor saved Clayton County from being stuck with the cost of a TIF-funded tax-exempt urban renewal revenue bond of \$20,000,000 for an upscale tourist attraction.

The North Liberty Leader doesn't

have the cachet of the larger newspapers "covering the corridor," but it is well-written, independent, and thoroughly researched. Editor **Lori Lindner** frequently presents clear-eyed perspectives that don't always follow the unquestioning narrative of the other papers. One example is her in-depth article on Johnson County's third consecutive record voter turnout for a Presidential election. Lindner traced the history of early voting expansion in the county, noting the implementation of satellite polling stations as a turning point in 1992. She then gave 36-year Commissioner of Elections Tom Slockett ample space to flesh out that history and to answer accusations thrown at him in more recent months.

The Leader and its sister paper the Solon Economist also provide detailed coverage of city council meetings in North Liberty, Tiffin, and Solon, and thoughtful features on everything from school board decisions and housing density issues to music therapy and cuts in funding for congregational meals.

Tom Sands, a ten-year incumbent in a Republican district, proved to be unbeatable in 2012, but first-time Iowa House candidate **Sara Sedlacek** gave

*Prairie Dog's Honor Roll*  
Continued on Page 5

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# Don't You Dare Use the "R" Word

The successful campaign to defeat the new Johnson County jail produced unusual political alliances. The small Vote No committee included libertarians, Republican central committee members, Trotskyites, AARP officers, and a few aging Democrats with civil liberties sympathies. On the other side was the entire Democratic Party in Johnson County, including all local elected officials who took a position with the honorable exception of city council member Jim Throgmorton.

The organizations that endorsed the jail constitute a virtual catalog of the local Liberal Establishment: the Johnson County Democratic Party, Iowa City Federation of Labor, Johnson County Bar Association, Iowa City City Council, League of Women Voters, University of Iowa Student Government, Iowa City Area Crimestoppers, Johnson County Local Homeless Coordinating Board, Painters & Allied Trades District Council 81, Public Professional & Maintenance Employees Local 2003, and (my favorite) The "Friends of Historic Preservation".

How could all of these liberal organizations endorse a proposal to jail even more victims of the war on drugs, and more African-Americans? The answer to that question lies in the initial success of the Jail Coordinating Committee in disguising the causes of over-incarceration in Johnson County. Approximately 50 beds were needed to deal with jail overcrowding, which still left 80-100 to explain. Jail advocates said that we must "plan for growth", but they were unable to explain who would be incarcerated in the new jail cells

Local statistics about race were readily available to anyone who asked: 40% of those incarcerated locally are African Americans, who constitute slightly less than 6% of the population of Johnson County. All the Vote No campaign had to do was cite these figures to cause an electoral turnaround among many Iowa City liberals (note the voting totals at

Horace Mann and Longfellow schools). Sheriff Pulkrabek responded to these figures with a series of dizzying non-sequiturs, while other liberal Democratic leaders responded with simple indignation that you would dare raise the race issue.

There is a considerable degree of denial about race among Iowa City liberals. It would be worthwhile having a video of the meeting of the local chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union,

**"As someone who grew up in the legally segregated south, I can recognize signs telling black people where to stand and sit when I see them. So can they."**

which was actually divided on whether to take a position on the issues of racial disparity raised by the Vote No campaign. One member denied that the 40/6 ratio should even be discussed as evidence of racism on the local level, and this denial has continued after the defeat of the jail. Jail supporter and Press Citizen columnist Bob Elliott, normally a reasonable person, published a post-defeat article entitled "lies, damn lies, and statistics" in which he suggested that even raising the issue of racial disparity was an "insinuation" of racism in the community, as if that were intrinsically outrageous. Pro-jail statistician John Neff posted on Facebook an outright denial that racism was an important factor in the 40/6 ratio.

Well, perhaps these liberal Democrats are right, and there is no racism at all to be found in our well-meaning and color-blind People's Republic of Johnson County. It is certainly true that calling people racists, or even public policy is-

sues racist, is counterproductive. But it is equally true that this community needs to face up to the racial polarization that has occurred in Johnson County, and especially in Iowa City, over the growth of a working class African-American population. The proposed jail does not exist in isolation from other racial issues that have not been addressed.

In 2009 a homeless immigrant from Africa, John Deng, was shot and killed by an off-duty Sheriff's Deputy dressed in civilian clothes. This incident was referred by County Attorney Janet Lyness to the office of Iowa Attorney General Thomas Miller, who issued a report in September of 2009 that is well worth reading. Like almost all reports on police killings, the report exonerates the officer, but in this case the racially charged nature of the incident is simply whitewashed.

The report wades through a cloud of contradictory evidence, but it appears that one way to read this incident is that a white man came out of a bar and got into a fight with a highly intoxicated black man because he was spilling cans, apparently retrieved from dumpsters, on to the street. It is possible that John Deng was using what the report describes as a "small knife" to defend himself against this attack, although that is unclear. What is clear is that an off-duty (white) sheriff's deputy arrived, intervened in the fight, watched the white man knock the black man down, ordered the white man to leave (which he refused to do), and then when the almost unbelievably intoxicated black man (blood alcohol of .295) stood up, shot and killed him. As far as we know, County Attorney Lyness never filed any charges against the white man. John Deng has been, for the most part, forgotten.

As the investigation into the John Deng killing proceeded, the Iowa City Council was imposing an unprecedented

*Don't You Dare  
Continued on Page 6*

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# Burgers, Fries, and Memories

*Excerpted from the new photo/essay book by Marybeth Slonneger: "The Burg, A Writers' Diner."*

I moved to Iowa City from Ann Arbor in 1978 and was sort of floating through life, trying to figure out which way to go, when I was hired as a waiter at Hamburg Inn #2 in April, 1979. I worked there until 1981. The folks who had opened the diner in 1948, Fritz and Fran Panther, still worked there occasionally. Their son Dave, who was the manager, worked a lot of hours, including whatever grunt work was necessary -- which I really respected him for. Dave's aunt, Pauline Hamm, was a waitress, as was Pat Hinkle, who had started working there after graduating from high school in 1957. They were both old-school professional waitresses and great to work with. I also worked with the legendary waitress Mickey, short and rotund, whose booming voice I can still hear as she approached me carrying plates of food while I was waiting on a customer in the cramped space behind the counter: "Behind ya', coming in."

I was 32 years old when I started working there, and I was younger than all of these folks (though just a few months younger than Dave). That's the big difference between the Burg then and now--the wait-staff is much younger, and the customers are younger. It was more of a blue collar place back then, and of course there's been a lot of modernization. Back then we only had booths and counter, no tables. And, believe it or not, customers were not only allowed to smoke, but we sold cigarettes!

My favorite customer was Stan Yoder, Sr. (his son owns Stan's Barbershop). He was a letter carrier and the Burg was on his route. He stopped in every day for lunch --always pleasant -- and a decent tipper! (I only had one or two really unpleasant customers in the 2 years that I worked there).

But I really had fun working there. One night one of my regular customers,

a grad student of some sort, complained about the small portion of mashed potatoes I'd given him with his Roast Beef Special. So I took his plate back and scooped the largest mountain of mashed potatoes that could fit on his plate and brought it out to him. We both laughed hysterically (maybe you had to be there). And there were a few summer nights when I worked the night shift with a cook and dishwasher who were my age, and we didn't finish cleaning up until 3AM. Then we sat outside and drank beer until the sun came up. Those were the days!

But there was also tragedy at the Hamburg. I only worked with Mike Panther, Dave's brother, a few times before Mike was killed by a drunk driver on December 27, 1985. He was a great guy. The plaque memorializing him is on the outside wall by the parking lot. Mike's death almost destroyed Dave. But he took a year off from the Burg and went to clown school, and that helped save him. He became Babaloon the Clown, which took him into an entirely different world, away from the Hamburg. He's still occasionally performing as Babaloon, and he is still one of the few bosses that I ever had who I consider a friend.

One old Burg regular I have to mention is Carl Schlueter. In the 1990's I had a political talk show on Public Access Television, The Sanders Group, and shortly after Ronald Reagan came into the Burg in 1992 one of the staff told me that while Carl was drinking his coffee he refused to shake Reagan's hand when the former president walked down the counter greeting everyone. I didn't know Carl, but I tracked him down and he explained: "I just didn't want to shake the SOB's hand. He was a liar and a terrible president." So that week at the end of my TV show I announced that it was Carl Schlueter Day in Iowa City!

I missed Reagan's visit, but I did get to meet Bill Clinton at the Burg. It was a morning in November, 2007, about six weeks before the Caucus. I sat down at the counter for a cup of coffee, and there

weren't too many other customers. I looked at the table about 10 feet across from me, and there was Bill Clinton with four advisors surrounding him. There was no media or crowds of people so I realized this wasn't a scheduled campaign stop for Hillary. I drank my coffee and tried to eavesdrop on their conversation. At one point I heard Clinton saying something about the Arkansas football team and I raised my voice just enough to be heard and said to the group: "Wasn't that triple overtime loss to Mississippi State last Saturday night a heart-breaker?" Clinton got up from his table -- he was a lot taller than I'd expected -- and came over to me and we talked a little college football. Absolutely no mention of politics. I asked one of the Hamburg staff to take our picture, and when Bill Clinton put his arm around my shoulders his personal magnetism was so intense that I would've jumped into the sack with him if he'd asked!

I wrote a Press Citizen column about the Burg in 1990 mentioning how I was worried that the remodeling of the Hamburg might ruin it. But the remodeling, which has continued occasionally for 20 years, hasn't ruined it. It has a little different feel to it than when I worked there, but it's still a great place to eat and hang out. The Panther family and all the people who have worked and eaten there since 1948 have created a place that captures the spirit of Iowa City, I just hope I'm here to celebrate the Burg's 80th anniversary in 2028. ✕

— Gary Sanders lives in Iowa City. "The Burg: A Writers' Diner" is available at Hamburg Inn, Prairie Lights, Iowa Book and Supply, and Beaverdale Books.

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# Pamela Mary Stewart, 1927-2012

**M**y mother, Pamela Mary Stewart, died in July, just short of her 85th birthday. During her long life she was many things—a young girl in England during WWII, a nurse trained by the National Health Service, a feminist who went back to school to become a nurse practitioner, and an activist for peace and social justice.

My mother was born in 1927 into a large middle class family. Her uncles served the empire as soldiers, lawyers, and planters but it was my mom's strong minded aunts who really fired her imagination. One trained as a nurse in WWI and later worked in Soviet Russia. Another attended the progressive London School of Economics and was a social worker among the London poor. A third taught in a girl's school in India for forty years.

Mom matured quickly in wartime Britain. She watched her brothers train to catch German paratroopers on pitchforks with the Home Guard. She knew the sound of Nazi bombers flying over by night to bomb Manchester and Liverpool. Early in the war her family hosted five children evacuated from the Liverpool slums to avoid the Blitz. These children were so poor that they did not even know what the government issued toothbrushes in their evacuation kit were for. Mom was preparing to join the Women's Agricultural Army to do her part fighting fascism when the war ended.

My grandparents did not approve of my mother's wish to be a nurse. That was too common, but they were willing to send her to train as a nanny not to work as one, but to be able to properly oversee her own nanny in the future. In 1948, my mother came of legal age and immediately applied to nursing school in London. In that same year the Labour government created Britain's National Health Service, and Mom trained for free in one of the first classes of nurses under the NHS.

All her life Mom believed that healthcare for all was a fundamental right. She saw the impact that national

healthcare had on her patients and on her own family. Though my grandmother was a widow who had never worked outside the home, she never had to worry about paying for medical care in her old age.

My parents left the class system and religious bias in Britain and came to America in 1957. They loved the States, but the segregated St. Louis hospital where my father trained disturbed them greatly. My mother volunteered for JFK even before she had the right to vote. A few years later she volunteered for a Great Society program to expose racist realtors who only showed houses in certain neighborhoods to African Americans.

“She watched her brothers train to catch German paratroopers on pitchforks.”

Mom was an early and vocal critic of the war in Vietnam. She and our Bassett (who had birthed two litters) always wore “Another Mother for Peace” stickers at protest marches. She campaigned hard for Gene McCarthy in 1968 and it was during the Vietnam conflict that my mother became a Quaker and a regular at peace vigils in downtown Iowa City.

In 1971, at the age of 43, mom decided to go back to school to become a nurse practitioner. She'd worked part time as a maternity nurse or lab tech when I was young, but she knew that she had greater potential. Mom was one of the first nurse practitioners hired by the University of Iowa Hospitals and Clinics. For nearly 20 years she cared for pediatric heart patients, counseled their families, and taught medical and nursing students the importance of both knowledge and compassion. I have been surprised by the number of women who

tell me that mom was a role model for them and the reason that many became nurse practitioners.

After she helped with a study of the low quality rooming houses where her patients' families stayed, Mom was instrumental in planning and fundraising for the Ronald McDonald House—a welcoming place where families can stay while their sick children are in the UIHC.

Mom volunteered for all kinds of groups. She was particularly active in the League of Women Voters and quite proud that her aunts had fought for the right to vote in Britain. In retirement Mom expanded her work into book binding at the music library, recording books for the blind, and growing plants for Project Green. In her last years at Oaknoll she worked in the recycling station, served on the residents' council, and helped arrange flowers for the tables every Saturday.

My mother was many things, but most of all she was a woman who made me proud to be her son. ✂

*— Duncan Stewart is better known as “Pam’s son.”*

## **Prairie Dog's Honor Roll** *Continued from Page 1*

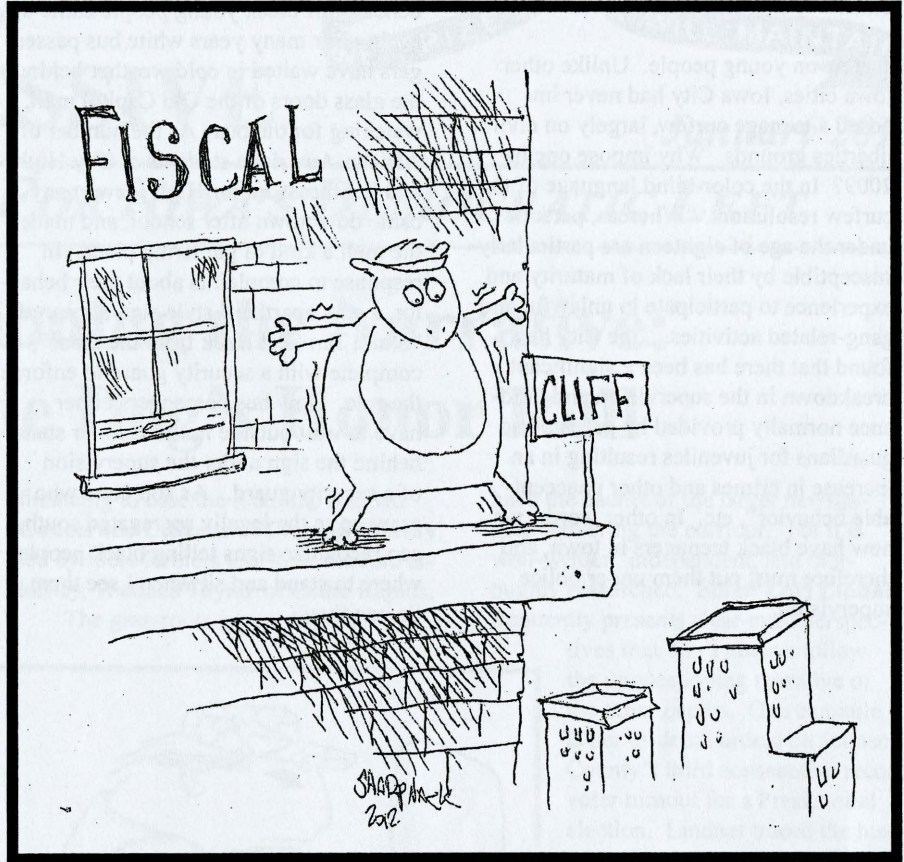
him a scare. Sedlacek, a small business owner and former journalist, came within shouting distance of an upset victory, powered by a remarkable 57% in Muscatine County. Her strong outreach to Latino voters brought more citizens into the political process and will pay dividends for them (and for progressive candidates) in the next decade.

After enduring staff turnover and a bit of mission drift, One Iowa enticed national LGBT rights activist **Donna Red Wing** to relocate in the heartland to help defend marriage equality. Red Wing hit the road with Zach Wahls, blogged for Huffington Post, and contributed to the voters' retention of Justice David Wiggins on the Iowa Supreme Court. ✂

*— Prairie Dog*

# CALENDAR

- Dec 25  
Federal Holiday
- Jan 17, 1893  
Kingdom of Hawaii overthrown by US
- Jan 21, 1998  
Clinton denied affair with Lewinsky
- Jan 30, 1948  
Gandhi assassinated
- Feb 26, 1993  
World Trade Center bombed in NYC
- Feb 28, 1973  
Wounded Knee, SD occupied by American Indian Movement
- March 3, 1913  
5000 women marched on Washington demanding the right to vote
- March 20, 2003  
US began war in Iraq
- March 28, 1968  
Martin Luther King, Jr. joined striking sanitation workers in Memphis



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**Don't You Dare**  
*Continued from Page 2*

curfew on young people. Unlike other Iowa cities, Iowa City had never imposed a teenage curfew, largely on civil liberties grounds. Why impose one in 2009? In the color-blind language of the curfew resolution: "Whereas, persons under the age of eighteen are particularly susceptible by their lack of maturity and experience to participate in unlawful and gang-related activities.....the City has found that there has been a significant breakdown in the supervision and guidance normally provided by parents and guardians for juveniles resulting in an increase in crimes and other unacceptable behavior", etc. In other words, we now have black teenagers in town, and therefore must put them under police supervision.

Two years later the irresponsible behavior of black young people came up again. For many years white bus passengers have waited in cold weather behind the glass doors of the Old Capitol mall, watching for the bus. As the number of African-American students at City High and Southeast Junior High grew, many came downtown after school, and made the mall a kind of gathering place. In response to complaints about their behavior, a new apartheid-style sign appeared: "Stand Ten Feet Back from the Door", complete with a security guard to enforce the rule. Now bus passengers either have to wait outside in the cold, or stand behind the sign under the supervision of a security guard. As someone who grew up in the legally segregated south, I can recognize signs telling black people where to stand and sit when I see them. So can they.

Jail advocates will no doubt be back soon with new proposals to incarcerate more African-Americans and more victims of the war on drugs. Perhaps this time around, we can actually have a community conversation about how to deal with issues of racial justice in Johnson County. ✕

— Jeff Cox

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