
THE PRAIRIE PROGRESSIVE



a newsletter for Iowa's Democratic Left

January 2021

Prairie Dog's Honor Roll for 2020

When the Trump administration escalated its war against diversity and inclusion programs, Iowa State University wasted little time in terminating **John-Paul Chaisson-Cardenas**, as director of Iowa's 4-H program in the ISU Extension Office. The native of Guatemala had long reached out to youth of color and had pointed out incidents of discrimination and indifference by ISU administrators, but his creation of a transgender youth policy gave ISU the excuse it needed to fire him. Two years later, the State Appeal Board agreed to settle Chaisson-Cardenas' lawsuit for \$550,000 and changed his official departure from termination to voluntary resignation. Congratulations to him and attorney Roxanne Conlin for resisting the power of the federal government and right-wing Christian groups, and for insisting that 4-H opportunities should be for all kids.

Rhonda Martin, city council member in Johnston, Iowa, got fired up after a march in Washington and decided to run against Brad Zaun, the longest-reigning Republican in the Iowa Senate. Martin's long shot challenge came within 975 votes out of 42,962 cast, one of the closest races in a bad year for Democrats. Martin stood up and put on notice an anti-reproductive freedom, anti-public education, anti-sensible gun laws, pro-privatization legislator of the worst kind. Like Kayla Koether, House candidate in northeast Iowa,

she lost but succeeded in building a grassroots network, holding those in power accountable, and showing that meaningful change can happen over time.

Prairie Progressive subscribers reached into their prairie pockets quickly and generously in response to our fundraising request for Iowa Legal Aid Services. Readers can continue to contribute at www.legalaidfoundation.org

Common Good Iowa is the new name of two organizations that joined forces for stronger advocacy, economic research, and analysis of state policies. Mike Owen and Peter Fisher of Iowa Policy Project and Anne Discher of the Child and Family Policy Project are long-time watchdogs of government budgets, steadfast champions of a progressive agenda, and true believers in public programs that benefit everyone. Read their vision and contribute at www.commongoodiowa.org

Iowa's government has been plagued by charges that its hiring processes are discriminatory and excessively secretive. **Marty Ryan**, longtime watch dog and Prairie Progressive contributor, smelled something fishy when a new director of the Dept. of Corrections was confirmed by the Iowa Senate. Ryan, a former Iowa ACLU lobbyist, accused the Board of

Corrections of violating open meetings law by not announcing publicly the candidates it recommended to the Governor. State Auditor Rob Sand and other good government advocates confirmed his judgment. Ryan also continues his exemplary work for Iowans Against the Death the Penalty, another worthy cause for Prairie Progressive readers to support.

Premier political pollster **Ann Selzer** stunned Iowans when the gold standard Des Moines Register Poll the weekend before Election Day showed Trump leading Biden in the state by 7%. Even more shocking, her poll showed Ashley Hinson leading Rep. Abby Finkenauer by a landslide. Democrats and long-time observers wondered if Selzer had finally lost her mojo. She had not.

Good local journalism, like that of **The Storm Lake Times**, is a critical antidote to the poison of our country's ever more nationalized news. Like the Prairie Progressive, editor Art Cullen believes that "print is permanent and establishes credibility. The internet is fleeting and can be manipulated by malefactors... But information needs to be credible, no matter what the format." •

Prairie Dog's Reading List for 2021

You must read, you must persevere...

—Giovanni Boccaccio, *The Decameron*

Trouble is What I Do

by Walter Mosley

The latest thriller by America's finest detective novelist. Mosley's intricate plots always feature undercurrents of class, race, and the ever-presence of vanity and pettiness even in the face of danger – all acted out by finely drawn characters with unforgettable names like Bug Bateman, Catfish Worry, and Foxy Donk. A compact 166-page gem that leaves you wanting more from Mozelle Tot, Jacob Indigo, and Pinky Eckles, who unflinchingly remind us that individual crimes are usually manifestations of a society's larger crimes.

Eager: The Surprising, Secret Life of Beavers and Why They Matter

by Ben Goldfarb

"Canada was built on dead beavers," observed Margaret Atwood. In many ways, so was the USA, thanks to the environmental wisdom and engineering brilliance of the hardest-working animals on planet Earth. Like prairie dogs, they often get a bad rap as pests, but always manage to survive while saving our ecosystem. The secret life in the title includes a description of beavers' "inscrutable genitalia," adding to the allure of these fascinating castorids.

Bring the War Home: The White Power Movement and Paramilitary America

by Kathleen Belew

It's no accident that many of today's paramilitary organizations multiplied in the late 1970s, adopting the uniform of jungle camouflage outfits rather than traditional white robes and hoods. Angry and alienated

armed groups proliferate after a war. Tactics, strategy, and motivation also reflect the Vietnam experience – "If we could kill Communists over there, why can't we kill them here?" Thanks to the internet, every American teenager has been exposed to this kind of rhetoric. It's also no coincidence that, as young people are recruited by seemingly but not actually "leaderless cells," they've never lived in a time when their country was not at war. Prof. Belew beseeches us to see that acts of racist and anti-government terrorism are part of a movement; Oklahoma Federal Building bomber Timothy McVey was not a lone wolf.

The People, No by Thomas Frank

The author of *What's the Matter with Kansas* continues his praise of American populism by ripping to shreds those who distort its meaning and those (like much-vaunted historian Richard Hofstadter) who have characterized it as a danger to democracy. Defining populism as any mass movement of working people, Frank castigates its critics whose actual goal is to defend a system in which they benefit. If you miss hearing Bernie Sanders rail against the elites, this book will get your year off to a rousing start. And in this time of rural vs. urban splits, let's remember that once there was a time when workers and radical farmers marched together for economic justice and electoral reform.

The Hightower Lowdown

Speaking of populism, former Texas Agriculture Commissioner Jim Hightower is the real deal, a fiery progressive with a sense of humor in the tradition of fellow Texan Molly

Ivins. Like *The Prairie Progressive*, *The Lowdown* is a newsletter that takes pride in paper, boasting "IN PRINT. IN YOUR MAILBOX. IN YOUR HANDS." Bonus feature: illustrations by former Des Moines Register cartoonist Brian Duffy. Subscribe at www.hightowerlowdown.org

Voyage of the Sable Venus

by Robin Coste Lewis

How to describe indescribable poems? An inadequate summary would say that a college professor traces the history of how Black women have been depicted in Western art over hundreds of centuries, often using the titles and museum narratives of the artworks to construct piercing and mysteriously beautiful poetry. Equally haunting is Lewis's account of hundreds of hours spent in museums and government buildings: "Black female figures were everywhere. That was the first shock. As far back as 38,000 years, as far away as any port, any continent, and in every artistic medium ever practiced. Quite possibly, the black female figure was as old as pigment itself."

Return from Siberia

by John Shallman

Discovering a 100-year old battered journal written by his Russian grandfather, a California political consultant learns that a passion for justice is deep in his DNA. Shallman, a University of Iowa grad born and raised in Rock Island, alternates journal excerpts with episodes from his own life, sometimes finding more in common with a long-dead socialist revolutionary than with today's Democratic operatives.

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With others of their own kind

In a field behind the buildings of four state institutions lie dozens of unmarked graves, some with stones bearing only a number. I saw these nameless stone markers when I was a Johnson County social worker in the 1980s. One of my main duties was to drive hundreds of miles to Glenwood and Woodward State Hospital Schools (now called Resource Centers) three or four times a year to check up on the care and treatment of my county's residents who lived there.

The problems now being investigated by the U.S. Department of Justice have existed for as long as the institutions themselves. No single cause is to blame. Problems are inevitable when people deemed to be "others" are housed in large, isolated settings where adequate oversight by family members and professionals is next to impossible.

One problem that is not inevitable is the exploitation of vulnerable citizens for experimentation and surveillance. Thanks to a DOJ investigation in early 2020, Glenwood Superintendent Jerry Rea has been fired.

One experiment conducted by Rea at a state hospital in Kansas used a "portable penile plethysmograph" to measure sexual arousal. He may have used a device he patented "for detecting and monitoring the sexual arousal of an individual while the individual is exposed to real-life sexual stimuli." One result of Rea's experiment was to show that "levels of sexual arousal... when a participant was wearing underwear and trousers were similar to arousal levels obtained without underwear and trousers."

I don't know if whoever hired Jerry Rea was aware of his predilections

and his patents, but the newest DOJ report, released in December of 2020, indicates that Glenwood administrators were more aware of problems at Glenwood than the public was led to believe. Governor Reynolds doesn't appear to be using her power to protect the human and civil rights or even the safety of the people who live at Glenwood and Woodward.

Many years ago, following exposure of similar abuses and deaths, the Des Moines Register ran an editorial titled "In the Woodward World." It was clear then, as it is now, that large, isolated state institutions are indeed seen as a different world where people who are not like you and me are often neglected, forgotten, and subjected to experiments without informed consent.

I have great respect for parents and other family members who depend on these institutions in the absence of quality services and supports closer to home. I share their frustration that the Olmstead decision by the U.S. Supreme Court in 1999, requiring states to offer the least restrictive settings possible for people with disabilities, has not resulted in community programs that can handle severe disabilities and challenging behaviors.

Iowa has consistently been behind the curve in developing community programs. We were the last state to apply for and receive a Medicaid waiver for home and community-based services, finally allowing money for long-term institutional care to be used for services in community settings. At last count, fourteen states have closed their state-operated institutions and redirected their funding to local programs. Only with last year's arrival of Kelly Garcia as head of Iowa's Department of Human Services has the idea of closure been broached by a top official.

Meanwhile, Garcia is faced with a mountain of problems resulting from former Governor Branstad's unilateral decision in 2015 to privatize Medicaid. Privatization has not saved money nor improved care for people with disabilities. Reynolds continues to support that decision.

Iowa's institutions no longer identify residents by numbers on gravestones. "Idiots, imbeciles, morons, and the feeble-minded" are no longer official classifications. Community services and supports continue to improve. However, oversight of how we treat those who are incarcerated "with others of their own kind" never seems to be a priority for our state leaders until the federal government takes notice.

I hope that the latest scandals are not swept under the rug, like so many others over the years, and that we develop alternatives to our institutions. Iowan's most vulnerable citizens and their families deserve better. •

— *Dave Leshtz*

Prairie Dog's Reading List for 2021, cont'd from Page 1

Honorable Mentions:

- **The Daughters of Erietown** by Connie Schultz
- **Night Boat to Tangier** by Kevin Barry
- **Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents** by Isabel Wilkerson
- **The Next Republic: The Rise of a New Radical Majority** by D.D. Guttenplan
- **Dancing in the Mosque** by Homeira Qaderi •



January 11
First day of Iowa
Legislative Session

January 16, 1991
U.S. began air war on Iraq

January 18
Martin Luther King, Jr. Day

January 26
Iowa Senate District 41
Special Election

February 24, 1991
US. began ground war in Iraq

March 8
International Women's Day

March 20, 1896
U.S. Marines invaded Nicaragua

March 22, 1941
Tuskegee Airmen activated
for service

March 25, 1911
Triangle Shirtwaist factory fire

March 31
Cesar Chavez Day

Gone and Forgotten

Despite success in maintaining its mission of service to our state, the struggles of the University of Iowa and its community have only been worsened by COVID-19 -- like treading with heads above water. To preserve our quality of life in Iowa, we must step up as a public in prioritizing support for colleges and college students.

Our universities continue to be proven economic engines, and their students are training to be the leaders of tomorrow. Right now, students away from home and in college towns throughout Iowa are often disregarded by policy makers in Des Moines and DC. Gone from home and forgotten.

In April of 2020, most American adults around the country, hit hard by the financial crisis, received a stimulus check intended to buffer the blow. Many were out of work, behind on bills, and struggling to meet their basic needs. The package failed to support American adults arguably struggling the most – our college students. Considering most college-age adults are classified as dependents, they were left out of the stimulus despite their uniquely challenging predicaments. The students I know in Iowa City needed a lifeline – many disproportionately affected as an underrepresented minority. These young Iowans were out of work from a closed downtown business, making the upcoming rent payment seemingly more impossible.

Fortunately, our already underfunded university had a safety net in the student life emergency fund, which provided nearly \$360,000 in financial relief to roughly 1,700 student applicants. The rest relied on their money-strapped parents. Throughout the summer I spoke with members of our congressional

delegation about the importance of the All Dependents Count Act, a measure that would ensure the inclusion of all dependents – whether away at college or at home with a disability. In any additional financial relief bill, we must call on Congress to recognize the struggles of college-aged adults and their families.

Beyond direct checks from Washington, Iowa has an immense responsibility in supporting our college students, and significant aid from our governor and legislature is long overdue. The University of Iowa's budget is comprised mostly of two revenue streams – tuition dollars and state appropriations. In the 1990s, when many Prairie Progressive readers may have earned their degree, about 64% of the university's budget came from state government, with about 28% from students. Today, those numbers have dramatically reversed. Due to generational disinvestment from the state and baseless mistrust in higher education, 2020's graduating class covered that 64%. A larger piece of the pie requires higher tuition, pushing more and more disadvantaged Iowans out of reach of the American dream.

Iowa City, Ames, and Cedar Falls may seem far away from the districts of legislators across Iowa, but inside every county is a family picking up the tab for their child to get a good education. As the New Year begins and the legislative session follows suit, let's make higher education a public priority once more. Iowa's next generation of leaders are counting on you to ensure we are not forgotten while we are gone. ●

—Connor Wooff is President of the University of Iowa Undergraduate Student Body

We still mourn the death last February of Jeff Cox, founder and co-editor of the Prairie Progressive.

We also mourn the deaths in the last year of long-standing supporters and friends Diane Finnerty and Tom Jacobs.

www.theprairieprogressive.com

Unless you have subscribed or contributed writing to the Prairie Progressive in the last 5 years (we can only carry you so long), please fill out the handy coupon and return it with your check (when you can afford to). Don't hesitate to send comments, suggestions, or rude remarks to dleshtz@gmail.com.

“The whole aim of Newspeak is to narrow the range of thought...Every year fewer and fewer words, and the range of consciousness always a little smaller.”

—*George Orwell*,
1984



THE PRAIRIE PROGRESSIVE is Iowa's oldest progressive newsletter. It is funded entirely by subscriptions from our readers. Founder: Jeff Cox. Editor: Dave Leshtz. We appreciate your support.

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