

## Early History of PFLAG in Colorado Springs

In the early part of the 1990s, Colorado Springs was experiencing an influx of right wing ideology and anti-gay rhetoric from many sources. Chief among these were Focus on the Family and Colorado for Family Values (CFV). CFV, a political organization, was founded by Tony Marco, Kevin Tebedo and David Noebel. Will Perkins, a local car dealer, was the chairman of its board. Focus relocated to Colorado Springs from Pomona, California, in 1991, thanks to a number of favorable incentives from local government, the Chamber of Commerce and the El Pomar Foundation.

The well-funded ideologues at Focus and CFV were frequently in the news, and the editorial pages of the *Gazette Telegraph* were full of opinion pieces about the evils of the "gay agenda." In the early 1990s for a LGBT person to have any kind of openness about their sexual orientation or gender identity was a difficult decision everywhere. It was especially difficult in Colorado Springs. Furthermore, it was starting to feel downright dangerous to come out of the closet in our city.

If it was scary for LGBT people, it was also unsettling for their parents and families. Two of those parents were Eva McGeehan and Pat Bass (Munson). Their children had come out to them, Eva's son in 1985 and Pat's son in 1990, and both mothers were concerned about the negative, hostile environment being created.

The day after her son came out to her during their drive home from his first year in college, Pat Bass went to the Chinook bookstore to find any books she could on the subject. In an effort to learn as much as possible about sexual orientation and the social implications of being gay in 1990, Pat talked to two openly gay colleagues at her workplace. They referred her to a support group of about half a dozen people led by Alan Cook and Susan Garcia, local therapists. It was at this group that Pat met Eva McGeehan and Perey Riley. The following year, when CFV began its campaign to change the Colorado Constitution with the "No Protected Status for Sexual Orientation Amendment" (Amendment 2), the little support group began to grow. Parents had questions.

It was clear to these folks that they were up against a well-funded and well-organized effort by right-wing extremists to limit the rights of their gay children. They learned of a national organization, Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) through Alan Cook. The three-pronged mission of PFLAG - support, education and advocacy - seemed like an obvious fit to combat the fear and disinformation campaign being waged by Focus, CFV and their many political allies. Pat contacted the national organization in Washington, D.C., and they referred her to the Denver PFLAG chapter. She met with the group in Denver where they advised her on organizing a Colorado Springs chapter.

That is a considerable oversimplification of all the steps involved, but let's acknowledge that in the epicenter of Colorado's anti-gay movement (also known as Ground Zero), it took a lot of guts to take those steps.

During that time, not only were LGBT people closeted, many of their families were, too. People feared reprisals from employers and bigoted neighbors and possible rejection from anyone - friends, colleagues, teachers, school administrators and even other family members. Consequently, PFLAG members had to be discreet.

Because it was a brand new organization, it had no money to rent venues for meetings, so the leaders needed to find space that was free and could accommodate a fairly large group. They also needed to be discreet about the locations of the meetings for fear of unwelcome visitors. They published only a phone number, and a volunteer would screen the callers before revealing the location. Because of the Amendment 2 threat and the increasing vitriol, interest was quickly growing among parents who wanted to help defeat the measure as well as find individual support.

The movement to restrict the rights and legal remedies afforded to LGBT people was originally launched in Colorado, Oregon and California due to the relative ease of amending the constitutions of those states. Publicity was relentless and because the well-funded anti-gay movement was getting a lot of space in the local press, particularly the *Gazette Telegraph*, Eva McGeehan started writing letters to the editor.

"If one looks hard enough it is often possible to find positives springing from negatives. The recent furor over the inclusion of a sexual orientation clause in the Human Rights Commission's proposed anti-discrimination ordinance brought out the worst feelings of prejudice in Colorado Springs. A negative to be sure.

"As a positive, the families and friends of lesbians and gays have formed a support group that meets the first Wednesday of each month. As the venom poured forth from those who chose to not understand, our numbers grew. We now have become affiliated with the highly respected organization, Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG).

"The group provides a loving and caring environment for families. It provides a place to share and to receive education and encouragement. Anonymity is ensured. Family members who would like more information can call ..." - *Gazette Telegraph*, May 22, 1991.

Eva would continue to write many more letters to the editor supporting LGBT people and their rights, and many nasty personal rebuttals to her would be published. She was one of the lucky parents whose gay son was finished with his education and was not living in Colorado. This allowed her to be an openly supportive parent, unlike those whose children were still in school locally and could be targets for bullies.

Winning the hearts and minds of people who were being influenced by the highly organized anti-gay campaign was one of the goals of PFLAG. After Colorado voters passed Amendment 2 in 1992, this became an uphill battle. But the army grew. At the first meeting after the election, there were over 75 people in the room: it was standing room only. These parents were committed to ensuring their LGBT children received the equal rights and fair treatment they deserved. This group increased its outreach efforts along with other local allies to engage the community in further dialogue and action.

In May of 1996, the United States Supreme Court ruled in *Romer v. Evans* that Amendment 2 was unconstitutional by a vote of six to three. However, that was not the end of the anti-gay agenda in Colorado, with each progressive, inclusive initiative being met with pushback from the right. Nevertheless, the work of PFLAG with its mission of support, educational resources and rights advocacy has continued and has helped move Colorado from its 1992 moniker of the "Hate State" to one of the fastest growing, most enviable places to live. Truly, PFLAG has not been alone in its fight for equality for LGBT people. Many other organizations have fought for LGBT rights. We have seen huge strides made in LGBT rights, especially marriage equality, and we continue to strive for a free and open society where everyone is equal and protected under the law -- and in the hearts and minds of our fellow citizens.

Written by Eva McGeehan, Pat Bass and Marilyn Davis  
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