

Campaign for Real Choice in Illinois Retrospective – Grant Antoline

When I was in High School, I was sure that the only way to help people was to become a politician. “Get to Washington and start to legislatively change this country for the better,” was my mantra. I was sure that the only way to help as many people as possible was to enter into the world of politics, confident that a politician who maintained their integrity and general moral compass would be able to move mountains. Chalk all that up to being a naïve youth...

I started by working for David Gill who was running against Tim Johnson for the Congressional 15th district. David was the politician I wanted to be; a no-nonsense all around good guy who was ready to kick in the door of the U.S. House and shake things up. He lost twice. Disheartened I was looking for something else. I literally was lost without a “project” that fulfilled my desire to do some good.

I was introduced to Claudia Lennhoff by the campaign manager of David’s congressional run at a save social security meeting. I talked to her a little about the group and came by for a visit. At that point I started volunteering full time at CCHCC. I loved every moment of it. I never heard of community organizing, never knew the non-profit structure or about organizational models. I fell in love with community organizing right then and there. This was what I wanted to do, period.

Volunteering full time over the summer definitely got my feet wet in the non-profit world but that wasn’t where I earned my stripes. When I transferred from Parkland College to the University of Illinois my junior year, I needed a job. I was volunteering with different things since I was sixteen and really didn’t have any savings or a way to financially support myself. I remember this day so clearly because it was absolutely perfect timing, so serendipitous. I was working the Emergency Contraception table at the U of I’s quad day. Claudia stops by and we start chatting. She said that she knows I have been looking for a job and heard that Barb and Lester Pritchard were looking for someone to help them organize a major event for the Campaign For Real Choice in Illinois. I was ecstatic. At this point I had known Barb and Lester through CCHCC by serving on the Board of Directors with them for a bit. I knew them to be dedicated, brilliant activists and I was excited to delve into disability rights organizing, which at the time was new to me.

I remember coming in for the first meeting with Barb and Lester and Jen. Barb and Lester did the interview and Jen was there to help answer questions and provide more insight into the day-to-day work. The home over on Pennsylvania Ave. in Urbana was our HQ. I would come there after school and work on the logistics of planning Freedom Ride ’05. It was a daunting task. Planning a multi-stop event with rallies, speeches and press conferences over a three-day period culminating with a final rally under the capital rotunda in Springfield was an incredible effort. We also had to book lodgings and accommodations for the riders who generously donated their time, stories and experiences in an effort to free their brothers and sisters from forced institutional care. It was an honor working side by side with

Barb, Lester and Jen. Lester and I would often joke around while working at our desks. Lester took this work seriously but he was brilliant enough to know that humor and wit is what carried him and others through the often depressing and frustrating work of organizing. His writing was perfect, his mind was sharp as a whip and his love for his fellow man was unshakable. Lester left us too soon and I will always remember my friend and brother in arms.

Barb was the engine behind the Campaign. She kept us on an even keel and kept Lester grounded in the reality of the task at hand. She was the smiling face and reasoned temperament that made it so easy to come to work. I always felt at home when I walked through the doors of the old house and the brand spankin' new house because Barb and Lester would give their guests no other choice. You had to feel at home and if you didn't you weren't paying attention to the love that was being thrown at you from all sides. Even when Barb and Lester were so exhausted from working night and day on their campaign, they would still take the time to ask you about your day, your schoolwork, and your family. That meant more to me as a young college student than they could know. Thank you Barb for showing that interest in my life. It meant the world to me.

Jen was my comrade. She helped orient me to the Campaign and the HQ. She is the most upbeat and die-hard positive person I have had the pleasure to work with. She had this incredible dedication to her work. Tirelessly trudging through the trenches ready for the next battle but always with a smile on her face. Some of the best moments I remember were sitting around the table having a staff meeting with Jen, Barb and Lester. We would get on task and then get off task (thanks Lester.....okay I helped some too) but we always made progress and at the same time we had fun.

Freedom Ride '05 was a huge success. The riders were able to garner the media worthy of such an event and each stop was better than the last. I wasn't at every stop due to my school work but the ones I did go to were just so unbelievable. The energy of each event was palpable. The riders were wound up, the organizers were nervous, the press was hungry for the story, and it couldn't have been better. In short we kicked so much ass, that everybody went through at least two pairs of shoes.

The final stop in Springfield is, to this day, one of the greatest organizing events I have ever witnessed. The capitol rotunda filled with freedom riders, supporters, family, friends and activists all there chanting in unison demanding to be heard by our legislators. The hundreds and hundreds of petitions that Jen and I hung up around the rotunda were a perfect metaphor for how the state's policies bind people with disabilities and seniors to a life beyond their control and away from their loved ones. The speeches were rousing, heartbreaking and perfectly appropriate. Our spokespeople were on message and the coverage was great. We.....owned....that....capitol.

I loved every minute of my work with the Campaign. It is no secret that I am working at CCHCC and I am the kind of organizer/person that I am because of the Campaign. I am eternally grateful that Barb and Lester took a chance on me. Barb and Lester, I love you. Thank you so much.

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