Alta Price PACG Remarks

It's wonderful to see so many of you here, people who care deeply about our community and our country. I know many of you were really looking forward to seeing Cathy Bolkcom again. She had come in from Minneapolis and had spent a few days here. Unfortunately, on Friday she had a family medical crisis that required her to return to Minneapolis. Please keep Cath and her family in your thoughts and prayers.

Cath and I had been planning to get together on Friday to plan our remarks about how PACG started. I was going to try to get her to do most of the talking. Oh well. Now the story will be based upon my memories and my perspective. The good news is that Cath wrote up a comprehensive story of the founding of PACG and some of our early history, which you can find on our PACG website. I encourage you to read it. There is a QR code at the bottom of page 15 in the Gala booklet that links to a page with Cath's story as well as more information about our past.

So getting back to how PACG started.

It was after the 2004 election, and George Bush had just been re-elected. Many of us were deeply opposed to the war in Iraq. Many of us had worked very hard to defeat Bush. To say we were disappointed would be a vast understatement.

Personally, I felt like crawling into a corner and withdrawing from any kind of activism. I vividly remember sitting at my kids' school waiting for my turn at a parent-teacher conference and several teachers and other parents approaching me and sharing their despair. Alta, what can we do?

I felt like I had to help them. So I said, well, we might not make any progress at the national level, but there are all sorts of things we can do at the local and state level. I shared that there were lots of local organizations they could get involved with. Myself, I was active with Quad Citians Affirming Diversity and QC NOW.

About this time, my school district, Pleasant Valley, was having a school board meeting to discuss banning a popular children's book, *The Misfits*, by James Howe. Someone had asked to have it banned because one of the young characters in the book was gay. Many parents went to the school board meeting. Almost all comments from the audience were in opposition to banning the book. But when it came to the vote, they voted for the ban. One of the school board members made a statement that the school wanted to protect all of its students. At that point a woman yelled from the back of the room "Except the gay ones!" She was the only disorderly audience member to speak out of turn. I thought, I've got to talk to that woman. Of course, it was Cathy Bolkcom.

Soon Cath and I got together over a meal and I told her I wanted to help my friends and others by having a summit to show them all the ways they could get involved in progressive issues locally. Cath thought that was a good idea. More importantly, Cath had contacts with numerous local activists and organizations and knew how to organize.

Cath approached Roger Butts, the minister at the Unitarian Universalist Church. Even though Roger didn't know Cath, he let us meet at the church. Starting in January, we met weekly and then twice a week (once at noon and once in the evening) through the end of March. I don't think any of those meetings had fewer than 30 people, and new people were always coming. Hundreds of people were involved.

Thinking back, several things that came out of those meetings explain PACG's success. First, we came up with a great name (that alone took multiple meetings!) Then came the idea of working in what we named Issue Forums. That structure has allowed us to work on multiple different issues, as the need and desire arose. And many of our founders came from different organizations, and we have always worked in coalition with others to be more powerful.

Finally, in April of 2005, we had our big PACG Summit at Augustana College. Over 450 people attended and talked about the issues they wanted to work on.

I really thought the summit would be a one off just to get people engaged. Of course, we've been educating members of our community, inspiring them to take action, and building a better community ever since. Cath always says she's good at starting things and I am good at persisting.

Although Cath and I are sometimes recognized as the co-founding mothers of PACG, the true co-founders are those hundreds of people who got involved 20 years ago. Cath and I might have been the spark, everyone else lit the fire.

When I was telling my husband about the Gala, he asked, has PACG had any successes? You should talk about those. Actually, for me the purpose of this Gala is mostly to have a party! I always say, we should have more parties. But my husband's questions did make me reflect, especially since our country is in a very similar position as we were 20 years ago, maybe worse? Did our 20 years of activism even make a difference? What was the point?

To better answer the question of our success, I think this needs to be addressed on an individual level as well as on a broader community level. So for individuals involved with PACG over the years, I know that working with others to take action for the common good personally benefits those doing the work. For me it is a way to channel my own negative feelings of despair or anger into something productive. I don't suffer much from fear. But I know many people do experience the negative emotion of fear. They can also use that negative energy to do something positive. The work is can be challenging, so you develop new skills and maybe new interests. It is a great way to make friends and build community. I've come to realize building community might be the most important thing we can do to improve our society. And a lot of what we do is actually fun, even if it is hard.

But getting back to the state of the country, did we accomplish anything with our 20 years of activism in PACG, and other organizations?

Well, as one example I told my husband how our Healthcare Reform forum educated people around the issue of quality affordable health care for all. We collected 1000s of handprints, in our effort to collect 18,000 handprints to represent the 18,000 people who died in the United States every year for lack of health insurance. We even got a handprint from Senator Barack Obama. (I am equally proud of getting Howard Dean's handprint, since I was a huge Deaniac!) Our issue forum facilitator, Karen Metcalf, was an important leader statewide and even nationally on this issue. And when Obama got elected, he got the Affordable Care Act passed. I told my husband, I guess we did succeed in that effort. So he asked "did Obama give you credit?"

Here's the thing, there were thousands of Americans who took part in similar efforts. And we were part of that. So I think we can count it as a success. But what about now, when it looks like the ACA may be severely damaged? Does it make a difference what we did so long ago? Yes, because when we first worked to get the ACA passed, it was demonized by those opposed to it. Now that it has been available for years, there will be many more people working to get it back and improve it.

One of the first issues I worked on was LGBTQ civil rights. Even before PACG started, I worked with QCAD and others on getting sexual orientation added to the Davenport City Civil Rights ordinance. I remember making a speech in 2000, I think at a QC NOW event, and stating that I hoped to see at least one state enact same-sex marriage in my lifetime. I could never have dreamed that less than 20 years later, marriage equality would be the law of the land. Of course I am very angry and frustrated at the attacks on the trans community, and other backsliding on these issues. But we are certainly in a better place today, and that is due to the actions taken by people in QCAD, PACG and similar organizations around the country. So another success!

I am so proud of all the great leaders and activists who have taken action on so many fronts in PACG over the years. Page through your Gala booklets for a sampling. And yes, we have had wins on many fronts.

In closing, it is important to realize it only takes a few people taking action to educate the public and get them to think differently about an issue. For example, the leaders of the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s were few in number. It was a small percentage of the population who directly participated in civil rights actions. But those leaders and activists impacted millions of Americans who did not personally participate in a bus boycott or march across a bridge in Selma. The leadership and actions of a few people changed the hearts of minds of most of the rest of the people in the country. I could use a more recent example of protesters in Portland wearing critter costumes, which changes the narrative that protesters are dangerous or violent. Then Operation Inflation spread around the world. If you were at the Indivisible No Kings rally yesterday you probably saw some of these creatures. And it was so much fun.

So when my husband asks, have we made a difference?, I absolutely believe that we have. Like activists before us our efforts have indeed changed our community and our country for the better. As Margaret Meade said: Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it is the only thing that ever has."