

Fort Collins' Newest Councilwoman: Lisa Poppaw

by Sandy Perlic

When you talk to Lisa Poppaw, the recently-elected city councilmember for Fort Collins' District 2, her feelings about her new job don't take long to surface.

"I love it. I absolutely love it," she said. "It's phenomenal that I'm able to do this... I couldn't think of a better way to give back, and I'm just so excited with the opportunity."

Giving back to the community has long been one of Poppaw's priorities. She laughingly says she's made a career out of being a volunteer.

Poppaw, 38, has volunteered in various capacities since her high school days. Born in Fort Worth, Texas, to an unwed teenager, she was adopted by her mom and dad when she was three weeks old. Due to her father's career with an international construction company, she moved frequently as a child, living in Arkansas, Alabama, Kentucky, Florida, Washington, and Illinois by the time she started high school.

When her dad decided to retire, the decision about where to move seemed obvious. "My family had always vacationed, as did (my father's) family and my mother's family separately when they were growing up, in Colorado. So that's why we moved to Colorado," Poppaw said. The family settled in Woodland Park.

With her dad now filling the role of stay-at-home parent to Poppaw and her younger brother, her mother went to work as a teacher. Poppaw soon followed her into the classroom, volunteering in various capacities in the schools.

After her graduation from Woodland Park High School, Poppaw headed to New Hampshire for her first year of college. A year-long hiatus from school followed while she worked, and then she enrolled in the University of Northern Colorado. With a passion for reading and writing, she majored in English and wrote profiles of Northern Colorado businesswomen for a local magazine. She continued to do volunteer work at every opportunity.

After graduation, Poppaw headed to California to be with her soon-to-be husband Jim Schinnerer, whom she'd known since high school. Schinnerer, an engineer with Hewlett Packard, had attended CSU. "We were married and then lived in the Bay Area for a little bit, and then moved up to Washington state." But ultimately, their hearts were in Colorado. They pressed for a transfer to Fort Collins, and two months after the birth of their daughter, Halle, they got their wish. "We had our son (Alex) here, and have lived here ever since," Poppaw said.

Although she had worked briefly as a paraprofessional in a self-contained special education classroom during the early days of her marriage, Poppaw has been a stay-at-home mother by choice. "I've loved being a stay-at-home mom," Poppaw confessed. "Of course it means financial sacrifices, but it is so worth it."

As her children got older, Poppaw says her volunteerism followed them. Volunteering in her daughter's preschool classroom led to volunteering at her children's elementary school. That led to her serving as the chairperson of the Linton Elementary Parent/Teacher organization for the last several years. "And then it became, wow, I see a problem with the neighborhood. Here's an opportunity for me to do something that would change this for the better," said Poppaw. Other volunteering opportunities arose, including serving on the Human Relations Commission.

“When this seat in District 2 came open, I thought, well there's an opportunity. I bet I could do really well at that,” Poppaw said. “And my feeling has always been, if I can give back and if I can make a positive difference, that's what I want to do.”

Poppaw believes her experience as a volunteer has prepared her well for her new position. “I learned so much from working as a volunteer, and from trying to be someone who motivated other people to volunteer. I think that kind of experience was invaluable, and I definitely wouldn't trade it for a salary,” she said.

As part of her responsibilities as a councilmember, Poppaw serves on committees for the Ethics Review Board, Housing Authority, Poudre Fire Authority, Public Safety Planning and Funding, and Poudre School District/City/County. She also serves as a liaison between the city and various boards and commissions including Affordable Housing, Art in Public Places, Youth Advisory and the Human Relations Commission.

Although serving as a councilmember is a huge time commitment, Poppaw doesn't mind it. “I just love it. Have I told you that already?”

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