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PROFILES

BY [TRRMAY 19, 2020 11:02 PM](#)

IN CELEBRATION OF WOMEN: PAULA CULLISON AND THE ART OF ACTIVISM



I first met Paula Cullison at a rally to protest the abortion bans threatening to sweep the nation. I was part of a small group of women standing up against the pro-life protestors who were waving the Old Testament in our faces. Occasionally, we would get a chant going and let it die out quickly. We were passionate but green.

Later in the day, the 5-foot Cullison strolled onto the grass courtyard in front of City Hall. She confidently made her way past the fanatics to our crowd, wearing a straw sun hat with a wire hanger sign that read “No Ban”. Her energy was magnetic, and we adopted her as our champion.

Afterwards, Cullison joined a group of us at a local Roosevelt Row eatery, Carly’s, for lunch. Over hummus and margaritas, we recounted our own stories of sexual assault, harassment, and abortions, stories that often get labeled as exaggerations or agenda-driven. After the vulnerable exchange, Cullison introduced herself as the founder of The Arizona Women’s Partnership. As she shared a small portion of her story with us, we understood that she was a driving force behind not only the telling of these stories, but the change-making that must follow.

Her foundation, [The Arizona Women’s Partnership](#), is an all-volunteer non-profit that empowers women and youth throughout Arizona. Cullison founded the partnership in 2002 and has awarded more than \$450,000 which was distributed to grant recipients. Some of the recipients included About Care for the Elderly, Alice’s Place Domestic Violence Services, Desert Sounds Performing Arts, Unlimited Potential, YES for Navajo Youth, and the Welcome to America Project.

Cullison grew up in New York with Italian immigrant parents. Both parents were products of child-labor. She learned from them the ins-and-outs of blue-collar life. Her parents encouraged college and opportunities they never had. She graduated from the City College of New York (Baruch) where she studied psychology. She later worked for the Bureau of Child Welfare before becoming a teacher.

Cullison recounted days of schlepping her two young children, stroller in tow, down several flights of stairs, across New York City subways to attend various protest as well as days of standing outside grocery stores with her kids, handing out flyers to support the United Farm Workers.

After moving to Arizona with her family, Cullison got a job with Mountain Bell Phone Company, which later became CenturyLink. As President of Women in Management, Cullison created “The Year for All Arizona Women,” an event to recognize and support women in business. She went straight to the top of Mountain Bell and pitched the idea. After some hesitation on their part, Cullison told them “This can be a Mountain Bell project or it can be a Paula Cullison project, in which case I’m leaving.” They made the wise move to support the project. Her first five events quickly turned into one-hundred.

After that, Cullison went on to create Wine, Women & Jazz: Getting Our Just Desserts, a series of fundraising events that showcased female chefs and restaurant owners. Proceeds went to grant recipients of The Arizona Women’s Partnership.

But Cullison didn’t stop there. She testified against uranium mining in the Grand Canyon. She sat as the Co-Chair of the United Nations Human Rights Day 60th Anniversary Program and was the organizer and Chair of the United Nations World Health Day Conference.

Cullison’s current project is the “In Celebration of Women” exhibit at the Herberger Theater. The show opened on March 6, 2020 and celebrates the Centennial of the 19th Amendment. The juried exhibit features 30 female artists across multiple genres showcasing the rich, cultural diversity of Arizona.

I asked Cullison where she gets all the energy to keep going and keep fighting. She smiled and said it’s just part of her personality. A phrase she repeated frequently during our interview was “I had a big idea,” something she never seems to run out of. In addition to big ideas, she always has the gumption to ask the right people for what she wants. Her requests are usually met with a “yes and we’ll double the offer.” I asked how she handled the Nos and she replied “I don’t remember the Nos. If you’re an idealist for the common good, you can make it happen.”

Katrina Bray, the author of IN CELEBRATION OF WOMEN: PAULA CULLISON AND THE ART OF ACTIVISM, grew up in Phoenix and attended the Walter Cronkite School of Journalism and Mass Communication at ASU. She holds a bachelor’s degree in technical writing with a minor in Women’s Studies. Katrina lives in central Phoenix and enjoys supporting local small businesses as well as the local art community. She enjoys reading, spending time with her daughter, and baking. She also has a small cake pop business, Pop the Cake Pop Shop.

<https://therevolutionrelaunch.com/2020/05/19/in-celebration-of-women-paula-cullison-and-the-art-of-activism/>

GUEST CURATOR
PAULA CULLISON

IN CELEBRATION OF WOMEN

HERBERGER ART GALLERY
HERBERGERTHEATER.ORG

CELEBRATING THE
100TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE
19TH AMENDMENT WHICH GAVE
WOMEN THE RIGHT TO VOTE

AN EXHIBIT FEATURING
THE WORK OF
30 ARIZONA
FEMALE ARTISTS

ON DISPLAY AT HERBERGER ART GALLERY
MARCH 6 - APRIL 26
ON DISPLAY AT ARIZONA CAPITOL MUSEUM
MAY 14 - SEPTEMBER 30

