

## **The making of Women's March Southern Oregon**

**By Bob Morse Ashland Culture of Peace Commission**

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"I was just in complete awe, having never created anything this powerful before," said Samae Chlebowski. She was describing the Women's March Southern Oregon which she and Sharon Dohrmann organized. They spoke to me at the Ashland Culture of Peace office in a wrapup session about the march's intentions and achievements. "Our goals were for people to walk away empowered, for marginalized people to know they have a voice, and for people to wake up."

"We met our goals, and we offered everyone hope," Chlebowski continued. Dohrmann nodded and referenced the 673 marches on seven continents. "The world showed us that we're on the right path."

Chlebowski, Dohrmann and I examined the development of the march, along with Irene Kai and David Wick of the Ashland Culture of Peace Commission (ACPC). I recalled our first meeting two months earlier. ACPC was the first organization from which Chlebowski and Dohrmann sought sponsorship. David and I had explained that ACPC activities are grounded in respect and inclusivity, never focused on an "enemy," conditions for sponsorship which our guests readily accepted.

The march organizers look back on that meeting as the moment when they first let go of the anger and fear that had been their initial driving force since their presidential election-night shock and day-after grief. Despite having never before organized, they felt a visceral need to take to the streets. Their initial idea of a vigil morphed when they learned of local women bemoaning their inability to attend the Women's March in Washington, D.C.

From the moment they sketched a march diagram on butcher paper, magic happened. Feeling like nobodies as they approached the city of Ashland, then the Parks and Police Departments and ODOT, they were continually met with

support and guidance. As they joined conference calls with organizing sisters around the country, they recognized the unique culture of Ashland and felt thankful they weren't facing the all-so-common red-tape obstacles.

Chlebowski explained how, "It was just an act of faith that this would work out. Sharon and I were acquaintances whose daughters are friends. We had never done a project together. Not once did resentment or doubt surface, even though we never really planned our roles. We just drew on each other's strengths." Dohrmann added, "We just followed our passions."

Following a steep learning curve, the organizers rapidly increased their skill sets. The duo had been assigned by ACPC to draft a statement of purpose. Those guiding principles served as a grounding rod, and the women felt increasingly "professional" with each blog they wrote and presentation they made. Dohrmann remembers how folks on Facebook shared the purpose statement with each other, lovingly reinforcing the intention that this would be an inclusive event.

The organizers' intentions and identities were aptly challenged when negotiating speakers. Their eyes were opened by words from people of color reflecting that as white women, Dohrmann and Chlebowski had the greater influence with (other) white woman. They were reminded by prospective speakers to "not ask me to do your work." The organizers self-reflect, grew, and became more aligned with their intentions, choosing articulate presenters with diverse backgrounds.

The marchers were also diverse in their affiliations and interests. Speaking in unison, the organizers described a main theme of their premarch dialogues: "We can't have a conversation unless everyone's at the table." In communicating with both pro-choice and pro-life women, they suggested that marchers support whatever parts of the event they aligned with — and "join us!"

"Inclusivity," reflected Dohrmann, "was what stood out" when ACPC had first presented her with the Peace Wheel, illustrating Ashland Culture of Peace's connection with all segments of the community. For Chlebowski, the ACPC orchestrated a tone of peace that legitimized her expectation that this march would remain peaceful — and it did!

Chlebowsky requested an ACPC speaker, Irene Kai, to close the show at the band shell. “I wanted people to walk away motivated, but I wanted people to first know peace within.”

In the evening after the march, Dohrmann heard “I’m proud to be your husband” from her choked-up spouse. “I have an awakening that’s so huge,” Chlebowsky shared, beaming. “I loved being a classroom teacher and willingly gave that up to become a mom. Now I know I’m an ambassador.”

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