

# THE WYOMING TRUTH

VOLUME TWO



[www.wyomingtruth.org](http://www.wyomingtruth.org)



**SMALL TOWN**  
CONSULTING



- Video Production
- Social Media
- Public Outreach
- Event Planning
- Media Relations
- Graphic Design
- Content Creation
- Advertising

[mandy@smalltownconsult.com](mailto:mandy@smalltownconsult.com)

307.421.2784

*Bridging the gap in rural communications*

**SMALLTOWNCONSULT.COM**

# **XK** KENNISON'S Katering

**Custom services for weddings,  
special events, meetings, parties  
and private dinners.**

- Custom Menus
- Special Dietary Needs
- On-Site Catering
- Delivery

We also offer  
horse boarding.  
Conveniently  
located near I-25  
and I-80  
interchange.

**KENNISONSKATERING.COM**

Call us today to book  
your event!

Ami Kennison  
951-226-6295



# CONTENTS



**3** BEHIND THE SCENES OF A TRAGIC THEFT CASE STILL RIDDLED WITH TROUBLING QUESTIONS



**18**

GOSHEN COUNTY SEARCH AND RESCUE TEAM FOLLOW UP ON TIP



**32**

A LOOK AT GOVERNOR GORDON'S LIFE

## CRIMINAL JUSTICE

- 3** THE MICHAEL LYNCH CASE: WHAT REALLY HAPPENED?
- 26** FOUR MEN NABBED IN GILLETTE SEX TRAFFICKING STING

## OTHER NEWS & FEATURES

- 18** THE SEARCH FOR IRENE: CADAVER DOG TEAM JOINS SEARCH FOR MISSING KENYAN
- 22** WYOMING SCHOOLS AT A CROSSROADS: STAFF SHORTAGES IN WYOMING SCHOOLS RAISE CONCERN ABOUT STUDENTS' FUTURES

## POLITICS

- 11** THE PRIME TIME OF HARRIET HAGEMAN
- 32** THE SECRET BEHIND GOV. MARK GORDON'S ENDURING POPULARITY

## EXTRAS

- 10** POLITICAL CARTOONS
- 30** FEATURED PHOTO
- 31** BE SURE TO CHECK OUT OUR REGULAR COLUMNS

✉ 506 SOUTH 8TH STREET  
LARAMIE, WY 82070  
INFO@WYOMINGTRUTH.ORG

🌐 WWW.WYOMINGTRUTH.ORG



# ABOUT US

## OUR MISSION

Established in 2021, we are a nonpartisan, nonprofit news operation dedicated to helping the community and fighting for the rights of local citizens.

## EDITORIAL STATEMENT

The Wyoming Truth, a nonpartisan news nonprofit, adheres to the principles of fair, accurate and thorough journalism. We follow the Society of Professional Journalists Code of Ethics, which means being accountable and transparent, minimizing harm, acting independently and seeking the truth and reporting it. We strive to publish impartial, informative stories that matter to local citizens, serving as a watchdog for the community.



The Wyoming Truth is a member of the Society of Professional Journalists, the National Newspaper Association and the Associated Press.

## The Team



Alec Klein  
President



Tom Fleener  
General Counsel



Cynthia Hanson  
Editor



Shen Wu Tan  
Reporter



Kaycee  
Clark-Mellott  
Web Editor & Writer



Kristi Eaton  
Contributing  
Writer



Grace Foulk  
Contributing  
Broadcaster



Jacob Gardenswartz  
Washington, D.C.,  
Correspondent



Amber Gibson  
Contributing  
Writer



Samuel Gilbert  
Contributing  
Writer



Jennifer Kocher  
Contributing  
Writer



Mandy Ludtke  
Development &  
Marketing Manager



Matt Stirn  
Contributing  
Photographer



Melissa Thomasma  
Contributing  
Writer



Madeline  
Thulin  
Coordinator



Rachelle Trujillo  
Contributing  
Writer

## The Advisory Board



Rhonda  
Bear



Cassie  
Craven



Mike Crothers  
Chairman



Lindsay  
Dreis



Rodney  
Fisher



Kelsey  
Fleener



Tom  
Fleener



Jodi  
Garvey



Elizabeth  
Greenwood



Edward  
Klein



Rex A.  
Mann



Dixie  
McCollum



Inga  
Parsons



Marisa  
Rosen



Elisabeth  
M.W. Trefonas



# THE MICHAEL LYNCH CASE: WHAT REALLY HAPPENED?

By Alec Klein  
August 4, 2022

## Behind the scenes of a tragic theft case still riddled with troubling questions

FOUNTAIN, Colo.—Signs of life are everywhere.

Michael Lynch's white pickup truck squats by the curb, as if waiting to take him to work. His orange snow skis rest against the living room wall, ready for the next hurtle down the mountains. And his old German Shepherd, Vito, sits on his haunches, prepared for their next avalanche rescue.

Down the hall, in Michael's bedroom, stuff is scattered on the floor: worn cowboy boots, work gloves and a gray bag left open, spewing camping gear that will never be used again.

"I can still smell him," Michael's mother,

Geralynn Lynch, said almost in a whisper, peeking inside his darkened room.

It is an overcast day, and all that's missing is Michael himself. That's because Michael Lynch passed away last year at the age of 37, the tragic result of a drug overdose after being freed on pretrial release. He was awaiting trial on burglary, theft and other charges in Teton County, Wyoming.

Michael's death certificate ruled it an "accident," but his mother, struggling to contain her emotions, blames his death squarely on the authorities who were bearing down on him.

"They killed him," she said firmly from her living room.

“That’s when he started using drugs,” chimes in his cousin, Brandon Windle.

What they believe is, Michael, who owned a successful landscaping business in the Jackson Hole area, succumbed to a devastating combination of undeserved but unrelenting calamity, pressure and injustice.

In 2019, Michael was charged with several counts of burglary and theft; authorities suspected he stole tens of thousands of dollars of items from the home of his landlord who also was his roommate. Detectives expanded their investigation, believing Michael was responsible for other burglaries in the area, including stealing from his landscaping clients.

Michael, who maintained his innocence, pleaded not guilty, and his family insists he was falsely charged with theft, burglary and other charges. They say police threatened Michael, telling him not to talk to potential witnesses. They say prosecutors heaped on criminal charges that wouldn’t stick and changed the charges when Michael refused to accept any plea deal. They say the local press about Michael’s case ruined his once-thriving landscaping business. They say his ex-girlfriend threatened to never let him see their five-year-old son again.

“They kept adding charges,” said Geralynn, his mother. “It was all a bunch of lies.”

Erin E. Weisman, the elected Teton County and prosecuting attorney, and Sheriff Matt Carr of the Teton County Sheriff’s Office, did not respond to requests for comment.

*Pictured right: Geralynn Lynch holds a small heart-shaped wooden urn within which sit her son’s ashes. (Wyoming Truth photo by Alec Klein)*

Defense investigator notes and text exchanges obtained for this article reference rising tension between the two roommates, with Michael acknowledging that he moved items around the house “just to mess around” with his roommate, who did not respond to requests for comment.

In addition, defense investigator records indicate that the two roommates often went into each other’s living space and shared living space—and that they both collected various things, coins among them, making it unclear as to where items were placed and to whom they belonged. Indeed, it appears some of the items that the roommate thought had been stolen were actually on Michael’s side of the house before Michael moved in, records indicate.

Michael, his family said, acknowledged that he may have purchased or bartered to acquire some used items, not knowing where they had come from or whether they may have been stolen—but he himself had



not stolen anything. Bartering is not uncommon in some parts of Jackson Hole. What's more, Michael's family said, all manner of friends and others would traipse through his place, and who knows who might have nabbed something that didn't belong to them? But this, his family said, is a far cry from the idea that Michael was some kind of master thief.

When police arrested Michael, they also arrested his then-girlfriend. But charges against her were dropped, and in a reversal, she was named a victim in a domestic battery charge against Michael, though that alleged incident had occurred several months earlier and hadn't been reported to authorities then, records show. "At the time she was treated for her injuries, she told medical staff she sustained the injuries while wrestling with a friend," according to the defense investigator's notes.

How Michael's girlfriend pivoted from suspect to victim, accusing him of wrongdoing, is unclear; she couldn't be reached for comment. What is clear is that the turn of events only made matters worse for Michael. He "believes she turned against him once the police became involved," the defense investigator wrote in his notes.

The multiple charges against Michael expanded to include not only burglary and theft, but also forgery and unauthorized use of personal identifying information, court records show. He was also charged with two counts of domestic battery and aggravated assault and battery, according to records.

"The domestic battery and aggravated assault charges came about when it was discovered that there had been some incidents that occurred around the same

time frame of the thefts and aggravated burglary," Det. Bret Bommer of the Teton County Sheriff's Office was quoted as saying then. "It's been a snowball effect."

As deputies pursued the investigation, the snowball became an avalanche as "some clients and previous employers of Michael Lynch read about his arrest in the Jackson Hole newspaper," according to the defense investigator's note. "They contacted deputies regarding missing property they suspected Michael Lynch had stolen from them."

Meanwhile, Michael languished in jail for months.

"They destroyed his life ... Such a little town can shrink you into nothing ... They just slammed him and put him away," GERALYNN said of her son and the work of authorities. "...They need to know what they did."

After Michael's parents bailed him out of jail, he left Jackson Hole to live with them in a warm place filled with Native American art just outside of Colorado Springs, Colo.

But the constant coverage in the local press back in Jackson Hole about Michael's case left the equivalent of a Scarlet Letter online from which he couldn't escape, even as he fought to prove his innocence, even though he had been convicted of none of the charges.

"It's horrendously horrible," GERALYNN said about the negative press coverage of her son's case.

The local paper called it a "massive theft case" and wrote that Michael's case, involving about \$50,000 worth of missing

items, such as rugs and jewelry, was “being described as the most audacious theft case in decades.” Police also accused Michael of stealing such things as cameras, a cowboy hat, coats and a wool blanket.

“The variety, I have never seen anything like it,” Bommer, the county detective, was quoted as saying in the local paper.

The detective also told the local press that after Michael’s arrest, he used a different name to keep booking clients.

“The entire contact between the defendant and the court system has been a lie,” then Teton County Chief Deputy Prosecutor Clark C. Allan was quoted as saying in the local paper. “It’s been lie upon lie upon lie upon lie.” Allan, now a circuit court judge in Converse County, did not respond to requests for comment.



*Vito, Michael Lynch’s old German Shepherd, sits on his haunches, prepared for their next avalanche rescue. (Wyoming Truth photo by Alec Klein)*

The local paper covered much of the twists and turns in the case in numerous articles, including after Michael missed a court date, when a warrant was issued for his arrest and how deputies allegedly found him hiding under his then-girlfriend’s bed, which he denied in court.

Also covered in the local media was how Michael, through his attorney, declared in court that he had been sober for several years. Meanwhile, while awaiting trial, Michael would rage to his mother about how those articles left the false impression that he had stolen jewelry, tools, saddles and other items from his roommate, though the charges were never proven. The American ideal, upside down: Guilty until proven innocent.

“What do you want me to do?” Michael would implore his mother in his final days.

“He was humiliated,” GERALYNN said, thinking back on those emotional exchanges.

His court-appointed lawyer, Elisabeth M.W. Trefonas, a senior assistant public defender who serves as the head public defender for Teton and Sublette counties, said in a statement, “Michael was diligent in working on his case and communicating with his defense team and the Office of the State Public Defender from the moment we were appointed. He appeared to have a very busy work schedule, working long hours without days off. He was worried often about his parents, and his child, and how this case was impacting his business and the ability to care for his family. He was detained for a



long period of time, had a revocation of his release during the pendency of his case, but was re-released with conditions because of the notable delay in being able to proceed with trial during the COVID pandemic.

“From my perspective the state of Wyoming conducted an ongoing investigation that never seemed particularly clear against Mr. Lynch from 2019 to 2021,” Trefonas continued. “In December 2020 and coming into the new year, the state filed a fourth amended criminal information notifying Michael of the charges against him. We received discovery from the state as late as December 2020. While I understand that investigations are ongoing, it seemed the state’s theories on the case were evolving as it amended the charges against him and as we sent our own investigation and evidence to the state in an effort to negotiate a resolution or to advocate for the dismissal of various charges. My office emailed Michael an updated court order setting his trial in June, and that his next hearing would be held end of April, on February 5, 2021. I was notified by my investigator that Michael passed away the day after his death on February 12, 2021. His death came a week after he was notified that his case was proceeding to trial.”

Trefonas serves on the board of advisors of the Wyoming Truth.

Michael was able to retrieve receipts showing he hadn’t stolen some of the goods, including tools and equipment, his family said. In at least one instance, deputies recovered a 9mm semiautomatic that belonged to a friend of Michael’s who didn’t

know the weapon had gone missing until authorities notified the individual, according to the defense investigator’s notes. “This may indicate he possibly sold it [the gun] to Lynch and lied to officers about it being stolen.”

In another instance, the investigator raised questions about whether Michael had done anything improper, writing, “During the theft time frame a multitude of subcontractors and moving companies had access to the residence and property.”

The investigator also called into question the allegation against Michael of forgery and unauthorized use of information by noting Michael’s girlfriend had given him “permission to use her credit cards.”

The investigator also noted, “Deputies returned tools to [one of the alleged victims] based on model numbers and type of tool purchased during [Michael’s] employment and not by matching serial numbers. It is entirely possible deputies gave [the alleged victim] tools belonging to and purchased by Lynch just based on description...These charges involving [the alleged victim] is an example of deputy’s eagerness to find additional victims of burglaries without any evidence to support the charge.”



*Pictured right: In Michael Lynch’s bedroom, stuff is scattered all over the floor: worn cowboy boots, work gloves and a gray bag left open, spewing camping gear that will never be used again. (Wyoming Truth photo by Alec Klein)*

Of the charges, GERALYNN said, “I knew it was a lie. I know my son... He went to jail for so long for something he didn’t do.”

What’s more, Michael’s stepfather, Lew, who passed away recently, had tried to explain to authorities that he himself had given Michael most of the things that they were accusing Michael of stealing. It got to a heated point in a telephone exchange with police, Lew said in an interview for this story: “I was going, ‘That’s mine’ ... That’s what I had given him. But they can’t believe it was given to him.”

Lew added: “I was pissed.”

One strike worked against Michael: He had had prior run-ins with the law involving minor matters, including a noise complaint, records show. But the burglary and theft charges—heaped on top of other charges—was too much for Michael to bear, and his mother began to sense something alter inside him in the days leading up to the end.

On the morning of Feb. 11, Lew almost knocked on Michael’s bedroom door when his son didn’t emerge for their regular cup of coffee together.

“He didn’t get up that morning,” Lew said wistfully.

Later that day, GERALYNN took notice of her son’s white truck parked outside the house. She thought, maybe he had left the truck behind and gone to work with someone else. And yet, she said, “I could smell it.”

Smell what?

“Death.”

When she finally entered Michael’s room that day, she found him face down on the floor by his bed. She banged on his chest repeatedly—not to awake him, because she knew it wasn’t a slumber; she banged on his chest because it was a kind of rage. Her son had left her.

She struggled to breathe. She wept inconsolably.

“I knew he was gone,” she said.

It wasn’t, GERALYNN said, an accident. “My son took his life,” she said. “I don’t think. I know.”

This wasn’t the Michael that she remembers. GERALYNN, in her late 60s, holds open a photo album falling apart at the binding.

Snapshot: Michael, the baby, with a bottle in his mouth.

Snapshot: Michael, at about 5 years old, smiling broadly, his shirt collar buttoned to the top.

Snapshot: Michael, a kid on a baseball team, grinning.

Michael took to the outdoors and skiing right from the beginning, way back when he was a toddler growing up in Michigan, in Ortonville, Franklin and Troy.

Brandon, his cousin, distinctly remembers those early days; they grew up together. “He was a really good dude,” Brandon said in an interview for this story. The two boys would build little ski jumps and “road gaps,” over which they’d leap.

In one of their last conversations, Brandon remembers Michael talking about the idea of buying some property up in the Colorado mountains. He'd build a cabin, culling timber from the surrounding trees.

"There was a silent, deep person in him," said his sister who goes by the name Jenna Justice and is three years Michael's senior. "... He was a magical person. He should never have gone through this."

Geralynn, his mother, thinks back to a recent memory, of summer, on a sweltering day. She happened to be passing by the picture window at the front of the house in Colorado when she caught a glimpse of Michael outside, working on the brakes of his truck. She paused, watching her son, a grown man now, a father to a little boy, M.J. Michael wasn't just a landscaper. He plowed snow. He did electrical work, plumbing, carpentry. Even more, he worked as a member of a search and rescue team to save people's lives. He'd go up into the passes with Vito, his German Shepherd, because that was who he was and this was his natural habitat—the quiet and solitude and purity of the snow and the mountains; he loved the Tetons.

"The best way to die," he'd tell his mother, "is in an avalanche."

"That's what he always said," she said. "He was a back mountain man."

But what she observed through that window that day was something else, while Michael—a fit figure—worked on his truck brakes.

"When I would look at him," she said, "and this is being honest, I was so proud: My God, I had the most beautiful son."

Covid delayed the trial for months. Authorities refused to dismiss the charges until they received a certified copy of his autopsy from his lawyer. "I was told in order to dismiss it, they needed the death certificate," recalls Trefonas, Michael's attorney, who went ahead and filed the paperwork to obtain the death certificate. "I've never had to do that before."

With Michael's passing, the case never went to trial.

Geralynn holds a small heart-shaped wooden urn within which sit Michael's ashes. Etched on the front is a wolf, howling, signifying something about the call of the wild, into the wilderness, where Michael was most at home.

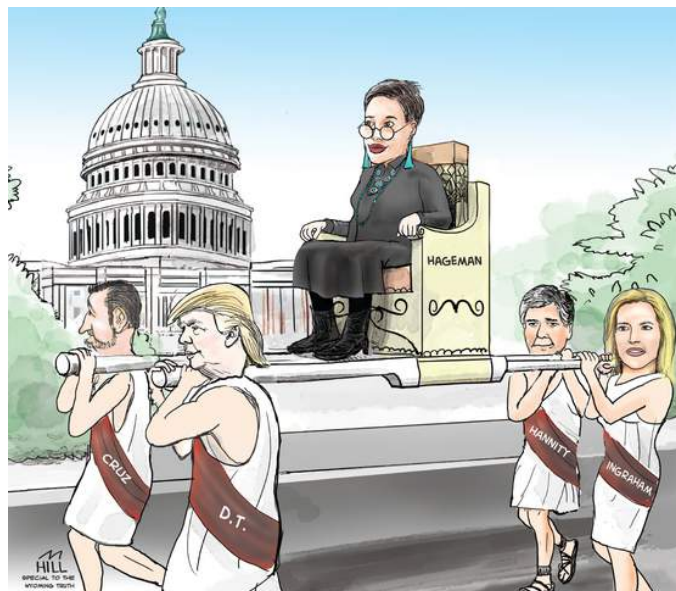
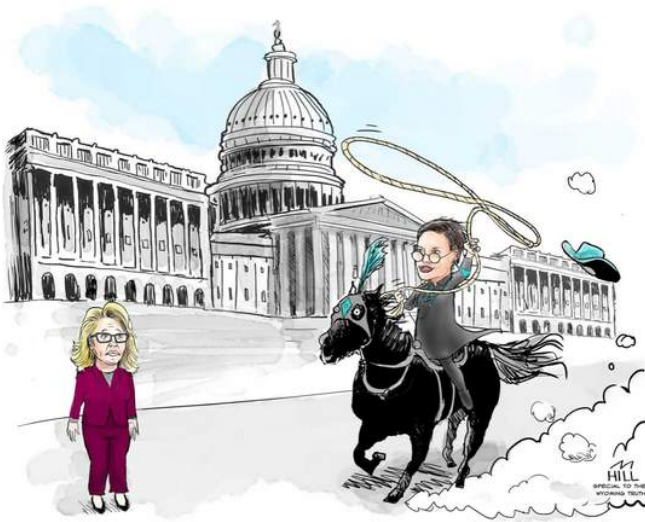
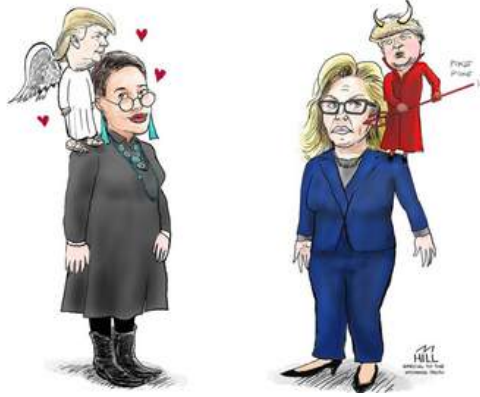
Geralynn intends to spread his ashes out there, among the tallest peaks, when the mountain passes open.

"I miss my son so much," Geralynn said. "He didn't deserve it at all. My son should not have died. He couldn't take it anymore."



*Michael Lynch, in happier days, with his son. (Courtesy photo from the Lynch family)*

# POLITICAL CARTOONS



# THE PRIME TIME OF HARRIET HAGEMAN



By Shen Wu Tan  
June 29, 2022

## **The Trump-backed U.S. House candidate stresses importance of accountability and representing constituents. Congressional race: for or against Liz Cheney?**

ROCK SPRINGS, Wyo. – On a recent Saturday night, Harriet Hageman, rocking her signature gothic cowgirl outfit—black dress, black boots and bold silver and turquoise jewelry—ambled around the training room at the Sweetwater County Sheriff’s Office in Rock Springs, appearing at ease as she conversed with the small crowd gathered for her town hall.

She smiled brightly. She shook hands vigorously. She listened intently to voters’ concerns.

It was retail politics at its finest.

Hageman has had plenty of practice schmoozing voters in the weeks since former President Donald Trump drew 8,000 GOP faithful to a campaign rally for her at the Ford Wyoming Center in Casper. Through late June, Hageman, a candidate for Wyoming’s lone seat in the U.S. House of Representatives, has traveled thousands of miles across the state and hosted more than a dozen town halls to promote her “Wyoming First” message. She’s met ranchers in Greybull and veterans in Cheyenne. She’s huddled with pro-lifers at a prayer vigil in Casper and cheered with horse racing enthusiasts in Gillette.

Without a doubt, Hageman is working for the Wyoming vote.

“We really do have to start making our representatives work for us,” she told the audience of 15 in Rock Springs. “What has happened so many times and what is happening now with our representatives in Congress, especially, is that they don’t represent their constituents.”

Hageman added, “What I’ve heard more than any other word as I’ve traveled the state is accountability. People are really hungry for accountability. People are really hungry to know that people are representing them and representing their interests and that they are answerable to them.”

Hageman was taking direct aim at U.S. Rep. Liz Cheney (Wyo.), her chief opponent in the GOP primary Aug. 16. Cheney, 55, is one of two Republicans serving on the select committee investigating the Jan. 6, 2021, riot at the U.S. Capitol and Trump’s alleged involvement in provoking it. For weeks, she has basked in the media spotlight, presiding over televised hearings from Washington, D.C., as she appears to be seeking to achieve what two impeachments failed to do: Cancel Trump as a viable candidate for a second term.

On Thursday, Hageman and Cheney, along with three other GOP contenders, will face off in a televised debate hosted by WyomingPBS. The debate will be aired at 7 p.m. Mountain Time on Wyoming statewide television, as well as live-streamed on Wyoming Public Media and YouTube.

Harriet Hageman, the 59-year-old land use attorney from Cheyenne, is about to have her prime time moment.

*Pictured right: Harriet Hageman speaks to a riled-up crowd at former President Donald Trump’s “Save America” rally in Casper. Trump hosted the event to raise support for Hageman, whom he endorsed for Wyoming’s U.S. House seat last year. (Wyoming Truth photo by Shen Wu Tan)*

### Hageman surges to the lead, while Cheney seeks help from Wyoming Democrats

The debate comes at a critical time in the midterm election cycle. With less than 50 days until the primary, Trump’s endorsement and Hageman’s tireless campaigning seem to be paying off. Polls suggest that it’s Hageman’s race to lose. A June poll conducted by Fabrizio, Lee & Associates for the pro-Hageman Super PAC Wyoming Values found that 58% of GOP voters view Hageman favorably, up from 48% in December, while only 26% view Cheney favorably, down from 29%.

Another poll, conducted in late May by the WPA Intelligence on behalf of the Club for Growth PAC, gave Hageman a 30-point lead over Cheney among Wyoming Republican primary voters. The poll found that 56% of primary voters would support Hageman compared to 26% who would support Cheney.

Both polls were funded by groups backing Hageman. Consequently, Erich Frankland, a political science professor at Casper College, advised taking the findings with a grain of salt.



“[They] are somewhat suspect due to their funders, sample size, etc.,” he told the Wyoming Truth. “Likely subsequent polls will show a much tighter race.”

Even so, it’s clear that Cheney is feeling the heat. Last week, just minutes before she took her seat center stage at the fifth Jan. 6 hearing, The New York Times reported that Cheney sent mail to Wyoming Democrats this month with specific instructions on how to change their party affiliation and urged them to do so to support her in the Aug.16 primary. Cheney’s campaign website also provides directions for making the switch.

“I wouldn’t fault the Cheney campaign too much -- after all, the goal of any campaign worth its salt is to identify and mobilize voters that it feels would support its candidate,” said J. Miles Coleman, associate editor of Sabato’s Crystal Ball, a nonpartisan political newsletter of the University of Virginia Center for Politics. “That said, the Cheney campaign probably wouldn’t be going out of its way to court non-Republicans if it didn’t need all the help it could get.”

Dean Ferguson, spokesman for the Wyoming Democratic Party, described Cheney’s campaign strategy as “an unusual tactic that suggests she isn’t very confident that she will prevail in a primary made solely of Republicans--the majority of whom are extremists aligned with the Trump-seditionist bloc of the GOP. If one Democrat switches party affiliation to vote for [Cheney], that helps her. Winning is all about finding people to vote for you. Whether she can find enough Democrats, Independents, and Republicans to support her is the question.”

While Democrats appreciate that Cheney is standing up to Trump, Ferguson said, Cheney otherwise does not share their party’s values because she voted with the former president more than 90% of the time.

Coleman noted that since Cheney seems to be so far behind, at least according to available polls, even Democrats crossing over en masse for her wouldn’t be enough to secure a victory: “The state is 70% Republican by registration, and if she is struggling with GOP partisans, that’s the ball game,” he said.

At Trump’s rally for Hageman last month, several Wyoming residents called for Cheney’s removal, claiming she doesn’t represent the state’s interests and values. And at Hageman’s Rock Springs town hall, folks who previously supported Cheney expressed buyers’ remorse.

John DeMatteis, a Buffalo resident who attended the Trump rally with his wife, Laura, believes Wyoming voters are tired of Cheney. “She hasn’t done what we would’ve wanted her to do,” he said at the rally. “And what she’s doing on the Jan. 6 commission is unconscionable.”

DeMatteis spoke with Hageman at the state GOP convention and during one of her campaign stops in Buffalo. “I think she’s very sharp,” he said, “and I would be happy to have her replace Liz Cheney.”

### **From cowgirl to counselor – and perhaps Congress**

So who is Harriet Hageman, the prospective politician who seems poised to end the

Cheney dynasty? (Liz Cheney is the daughter of former Vice President Dick Cheney, who also held Wyoming's sole seat in the U.S. House of Representatives for six terms.)

On the campaign trail, Hageman has capitalized on voters' negative impressions of Cheney—her critics call her the “Virginian”—to stress her own deep roots in the state.

“I think that it's time we have people who represent us in Congress who are just normal, everyday, average people,” Hageman said at the Rock Springs town hall. “I want to represent you. I am one of you. As I said at the [Trump] rally, I know Wyoming, I am Wyoming, I love Wyoming. This is for me the last shining city on the hill. And I think if we can get things right in Wyoming, I think we can have the rest of our country follow our lead.”

(The Wyoming Truth sought interviews with Hageman and Cheney for this story. Reached on her direct line, a slightly surprised Hageman was noncommittal about granting an interview and deferred to her media staffer, who did not respond to multiple requests. Carly Miller, Hageman's campaign manager, declined requests for an interview with Hageman on her behalf at the Rock Springs town hall. Cheney's campaign staff did not respond to other requests.)

A fourth-generation Wyomingite, Hageman grew up on a cattle ranch near Fort Laramie with six siblings. Her late father, James Hageman, was a former state legislator. Hageman enrolled in Casper College on a livestock judging scholarship, but transferred to University of Wyoming, earning a bachelor's degree and law degree

She then clerked for the Honorable James E. Barrett, 10th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals, before practicing law in Michigan and Colorado. In 1997, Hageman returned home to Wyoming, and in 2000, she teamed up with Kara Brighton Fornstrom to establish the law firm, Hageman & Brighton, PC. Four years later, the duo co-founded the Wyoming Conservation Alliance. (Fornstrom declined to be interviewed for this story, as did Hageman's husband, attorney John Sundahl.)

Over the past 30 years, Hageman made a name for herself while representing oil and gas companies, ranchers and farmers through her private practice in Cheyenne. Since 2019, she also has served as senior litigation counsel for the New Civil Liberties Alliance (NCLA), a public interest law firm based in Washington, D.C. (That same year, Hageman purchased a \$540,000 condominium on aptly named Wyoming Avenue NW in the nation's capital, according to real estate records.)

Mark Chenoweth, New Civil Liberties Alliance president and general counsel, described Hageman as a competent, articulate, thorough, dogged and impressive attorney, with expertise in environmental and Title IX cases. Hageman helped the alliance win a case in which a judge ruled that the U.S. Department of Agriculture cannot mandate radio frequency ID tags for cattle; she argued that guidance isn't law and that the federal agency, therefore, cannot change regulations to require those tags.

Some critics have labeled Hageman as an “anti-conservation” attorney based on some of the cases she's handled. Chenoweth disagrees: “I don't think that Harriet is anti-conservation; I think Harriet is interested in





*Pictured above is Harriet Hageman's Washington, D.C., condominium. Real estate records show Hageman purchased a condo along Wyoming Ave. NW in 2019, around the time she joined the New Civil Liberties Alliance, a public interest law firm based in the District. (Wyoming Truth photo)*

making sure that federal agencies respect constitutional rights.... She certainly is adept at holding federal agencies accountable when they run afoul of the law.”

### What Hageman brings to the table

Hageman has been a fixture in Wyoming GOP politics for many years. She was a delegate for then-presidential candidate Ted Cruz at the 2016 National Republican Convention and formerly served as Wyoming’s national GOP committeewoman before resigning last September prior to launching her congressional campaign.

In 2018, Hageman unsuccessfully ran for governor, finishing third out of six candidates in the Republican primary and garnering in 21.5% of the votes, according to Ballotpedia. That experience is playing to her advantage this time around. “Hageman has two strengths as a candidate,” Jim King, a political science professor at the University

of Wyoming, told the Wyoming Truth. “First, she was a candidate for governor in 2018 and thus has experience running a statewide campaign that the other challengers to Cheney lack. Second, Hageman has Trump's endorsement. This led to greater publicity than she might otherwise have had and led to at least one other conservative candidate to withdraw.”

He added, “The race is shaping up as a choice for or against Cheney, more than a choice between Cheney and Hageman.”

In addition to Cheney, Hageman faces competition from three other Republican candidates: state Sen. Anthony Bouchard; veteran Denton Knapp; and paralegal Robyn Belinsky, according to the Wyoming Elections Division. If she bests this field in August, she will compete against one of three Democratic candidates in November: Fort Washakie resident Lynnette Grey Bull who previously ran for the seat in 2020; Rock Springs resident Meghan R. Jensen; and Casper resident Steve Helling.

“So far Hageman seems to be running on two related things: Trump is the key to Republican successes and Cheney's involvement with the select committee on January 6 and the challenging of Trump,” said Frankland, the Casper College professor. “There seems to be little attention so far to Wyoming ‘values’ and interests...I think that without Trump's endorsement and some GOP leaders' urging, Hageman would not be a significant candidate for the primary.”

Mark Jones, legislative director of Wyoming for Gun Owners of America, said Trump’s backing did not factor into his organization’s endorsement of Hageman. Hageman scored 100% on its Second Amendment

survey, whereas Cheney scored 69% and voted for red flag laws in the National Defense Authorization Act, which would allow law enforcement to petition a court to temporarily remove firearms from individuals who could pose a risk to themselves or others.

“She’s got a history of standing up for constitutional rights through her work as a constitutional attorney,” Jones said of Hageman. “She is also running on a really strong Second Amendment platform. Just because a representative or a senator is from a state like Wyoming doesn’t always mean they’re always voting for Wyoming values, and Cheney has deviated a number of times.”

### Selective media strategy and the Hageman-Cheney relationship

While Cheney plays to a national audience in the televised Jan. 6 hearings, Hageman mostly courts voters on the campaign trail or through interviews with conservative news outlets. In June, Hageman appeared on Fox News’ “Ingraham Angle” to denounce Cheney’s participation on the House select committee. As a guest on Dan Bongino’s radio show, Hageman argued that Cheney was not elected to act as “judge and jury of Donald Trump” and noted that Cheney does not serve on the committee of natural resources, an area of concern for Wyoming residents. Hageman also told syndicated radio host Mark Levin that the House select committee, on which Cheney serves as vice chair, lacks due process and called it “show trial” that will not present a “snippet of evidence” to refute the narrative the panel is pushing.

Coleman of Sabato’s Crystal Ball compared Hageman campaign’s media strategy to a

“football team that’s up comfortably in the fourth quarter of a game.”

“It just wants to run out the clock,” Coleman said. “Generally speaking, candidates who are strong favorites don’t go seeking out interviews or beg to have as many debates as possible. It sounds like the Hageman campaign is only appearing on friendly media outlets because they don’t want to risk any unforced errors. In other words, if she’s only given softball questions by conservative outlets, it’s easier for her to just stick to her talking points and stay on message.”

Despite her reluctance to talk to reporters, Hageman enthusiastically engaged with town hall attendees, addressing their concerns that primarily focused on land, water use, and energy policies.

On the personal front, Hageman revealed that she married Sundahl when she was almost 40 and retained her maiden name for professional reasons.

“He wouldn’t let me take his,” Hageman joked.

When questioned about her relationship with Cheney—the subject of much media and public speculation—Hageman claimed that she didn’t meet the representative until 2013 as Cheney was launching what ended up being a short-lived Senate bid. Hageman said she had a falling out with Cheney in November 2020 over a disagreement about Trump’s refusal to acknowledge that Joe Biden won the presidential election.

“After she [Cheney] dropped out [of the Senate race] in 2014, I never really heard from her again until 2016 when she ran for Congress, and she contacted me,” Hageman

explained. “I introduced her at the state convention. I’ve had – I don’t know – probably less than 10 conversations with Liz over the years...We were political acquaintances more than anything else is what we were.”

Even so, Hageman made a \$1,500 campaign donation to Cheney in 2016, according to data from the Federal Elections Commission.

### Promises of accountability

If elected to Congress, Hageman promised the Sweetwater crowd that she would advocate for fossil fuels and would introduce a bill mandating the federal government use domestically produced energy. In the interest of transparency and accountability, Hageman also vowed to codify the executive orders Trump issued that require federal agencies to disclose all informal rulemaking, guidance and other documents that are enforced as laws.

Additionally, Hageman plans to hold Cheney accountable. “I’m not just holding her accountable by voting against her; I’m running against her,” Hageman said. “We are a republic, and elections are to hold people accountable for the decisions that they make.”

Hageman’s message resonated with the town hall attendees. Phyllis McCoy, 78 of Rock Springs, said that while she strongly opposes Cheney, she was on the fence about Hageman before the event. She wanted to learn about Hageman’s relationship with Cheney, and, satisfied with the candidate’s explanation, McCoy said she will now back Hageman.

Hageman also won the support of Cindy

Smart, 61, of Rock Springs, who likes her morals and qualifications. “For me, she’s on her own merits,” Smart said. “I like what she stands for, herself. She should win all on her own.”

As the Rock Springs town hall drew to a close, Hageman reminded the attendees about early voting on July 1. With a smile on her face, she bid them farewell and bolted to her car for the drive back to Cheyenne, her cowgirl boots clicking on the floor and her black dress billowing behind her.



*Harriet Hageman clears security outside the Ford Wyoming Center, the venue of former President Donald Trump’s “Save America” rally in Casper. (Wyoming Truth photo by Shen Wu Tan)*



**Goshen County search and rescue team follow up on tip**

By Jennifer Kocher  
August 29, 2022

GILLETTE, Wyo.—Jerry Numon trudged through the knee-high reeds along Burlington Lake with his eyes trained on his cadaver dog Pax. Numon was looking for slight head tips, changes in breathing, a drop of the head or tail and a dozen other indicators that the 6-year-old Czech German Shepherd had detected human remains.

Numon was called in by the Gillette Police Department on Aug. 26 to search the roughly 1.5 miles around the lake in McManamen Park for Irene Gakwa, 33, who disappeared from Gillette in late February. The Kenyan nursing student moved to Wyoming from Idaho last year with her 38-year-old fiancé, Nathan Hightman, who is considered a “person of interest” in her case, according to police. Hightman has since

been charged with five felonies related to financial and intellectual property crimes following her disappearance.

The police brought in Numon and his Eastern Wyoming Search and Rescue K9 Mounted Team to follow up on a tip, said Lt. Brent Wasson; he declined to provide additional information about the search or the ongoing investigation.

Along with his two cadaver dogs Pax and Scout, Numon also brought another cadaver dog handler, as well as Tony Goulart, a 45-year-old Lingle resident, and his horse, Sara. The 12-year-old mustang can detect human decomposition: she helped find a body found in a river during a search and rescue in Nebraska.



*Scout shows interest in an area along the shore of Burlington Lake. (Wyoming Truth photo by Jennifer Kocher)*

## Acquired taste

Numon begins a lot of his sentences with “that time we were called to a possible burial ground of a serial killer” or “when we found that dead body in the mountains.” As if that doesn’t make him weird enough, Numon joked, he also loves the sound of a barking dog because it shows its enthusiasm.

“This is why I’ve been single for the past 25 years,” he said, laughing. “Nobody wants to hang around me.”

At 75, Numon is more agile than many men half his age. He has worked with cadaver dogs and search and rescue since 2004. Numon is technically retired, and before he became a K-9 trainer and search and rescue leader, he was a gym teacher, coach and high school principal in Colorado and Wyoming. He also taught high school equivalency courses for the Wyoming Department of Corrections.

Per the rules of his licensing, Numon must be invited by law enforcement to conduct a search. He and his team work mainly in Nebraska, Wyoming and the Mountain West region.

Most of the time, they work for free if a law enforcement agency lacks the budget to pay for their services. This trip is on him, Numon said, and so far, he’s out \$600—the cost of meals and hotel rooms for the group.

## A couple hits

The team began their search at 7 a.m. with a half dozen Gillette police officers in tow. Numon likes to get an early start, because smells tend to dissipate as the temperatures rise later in the day.

He trailed behind Pax in his bright orange vest, calling out commands in German. Dog handlers use a variety of languages when working with K9s, but Numon prefers German because the harsh consonants and guttural stops make a distinct impression on the animals.

“There’s no ambiguity about what I’m asking them to do,” he said.

Numon stopped when Pax darted into a thicket at the base of a tree. The canine sniffed the bushes before jumping up and placing both front paws on the trunk. Numon craned his neck to see what had captured Pax’s interest, but was stumped.

“He smells something,” Numon said. “I just can’t see what it is.”

Cadaver dogs can detect over 550 smells from decomposing human bodies, including blood, bones, tissue and plasma. The odors can be in the water, air or buried

underground. In fact, to become a nationally certified cadaver dog like Pax and Scout, canines must find bone fragments buried, elevated or on the ground across three 80-acre fields.

Human decomposition can stick around for decades, Numon said. But to these dogs, it's just like death happened yesterday. On seven homicide investigations, Pax has found several cadavers and other evidence that helped police solve cases. So when he indicates, Numon takes it seriously.

As he always does, Numon brought Scout to check on Pax's work. Scout, also a Czech German Shepard, is three years younger than Pax and has boundless energy. Because Pax suffered a back injury that cost Numon \$13,000 in medical expenses, Scout does most of the mountaineering work.

Both dogs have their own style of indicating human remains. Pax will lay down and bark, while Scout just lays down silently. Both will stay put if Numon tries to walk away without seeing what they do.

Numon has learned to identify all their little quirks. Some handlers like to run two dogs at once, but he doesn't. If human remains are found, both would try to claim it.

"That would be one hell of a dog fight," he said.

In this case, Scout also showed a prolonged interest in the tree and looked up, indicating that he'd found something. Numon checked again and still saw nothing. Still, he trusts his dogs' instincts. It could be blood from an old cut or body oils that seeped into the ground

and are now being released through the leaves.

He's not sure, so the police mark the tree's GPS coordinates and promise to look into it.

Two hours later, the dogs continued to take turns searching different areas around the lake. Both bit at the water to taste it, though neither indicated enough to convince Numon that it was worth taking out the boat for a sonar search.

Meanwhile, Pax headed into another thicket of weeds, accidentally flushing out an unsuspecting duck without even flinching. Had he followed his instincts and chased it, he wouldn't be a cadaver dog, Numon explained. Part of their training is to tamp down their natural inclinations and focus solely on detecting human decomposition.

To that end, Numon has made friends with a coroner in a neighboring county who furnishes him with human remains for cadaver dog training. You don't want to look into the far two freezers in his home, Numon said, or you'll be in for a rude awakening.



*Pictured right: Tony Goulart, 45, and Sara, his mustang horse who can detect human decomposition, frequently partner with Jerry Numon on search and rescues throughout Wyoming and the Mountain West. (Wyoming Truth photo by Jennifer Kocher)*

In the past, Numon also purchased bones from the Bone Room, a California retailer that carries one of the largest collections of human skulls nationwide.

Today, Numon's team didn't find clear evidence of human remains in the roughly 5% of the park they searched. After Numon loaded his dogs into his pickup, his team huddled with police, setting plans for the next search.

These are not people who easily give up, and Numon promised they'd return to help find Gakwa.

"It's what we do," he said. "Being out here working with these dogs is as close to God as I want to get."



*Pax, a 6-year-old Czech German Shepherd, walks the shore trying to detect any of the more than 550 smells associated with human decomposition. (Wyoming Truth photo by Jennifer Kocher)*

# WYOMING SCHOOLS AT A CROSSROADS

## STAFF SHORTAGES IN WYOMING SCHOOLS RAISE CONCERN ABOUT STUDENTS' FUTURES

By Shen Wu Tan  
September 22, 2022

### Heavy workloads and feeling undervalued contributing factors to teacher shortage

Kimberly Amen, a third-grade teacher at Pioneer Park Elementary School in Cheyenne, is now following new computer science learning standards on coding and digital citizenship — without having received any training in these subjects. This extra requirement, coupled with Amen's regular workload and fewer support staff, adds even more responsibility to an educator whose hands are already full.

"Whenever you're short staffed, the burden of the extra jobs goes to the rest of you, to the people who are currently working in the field," said Amen, 52, who also serves as vice president of the Wyoming Education Association. "It's stressful having to cover... and they continue to expect more of us and give us less."

"At this current point, a lot of us [teachers] don't feel like we're respected as professionals in our fields," she added. "It feels a lot like we're not trusted to do what we need to do in our classrooms, what's best for kids."

A burdensome workload, low pay and perceived disrespect — these are just a few possible reasons as to why there are teacher shortages across Wyoming.

Figures from the Wyoming Association of School Administrators show there were a total of 165 unfilled teacher positions in 43 of 48 school districts statewide as of Sept. 20, according to Kevin Mitchell, the association's executive director.

However, a list from the Wyoming School



Boards Association illustrates that school districts are not recruiting for all of those reported vacancies. As of Sept. 20, schools throughout Wyoming are seeking to hire 54 teachers—mostly for English, elementary and special education positions. The majority of the openings are in Fremont County, Laramie County and Natrona County.

“When positions go unfilled, it adds stress to already untenable workloads for our educators,” said Grady Hutcherson, president of the Wyoming Education Association. “This, in turn, has negative impacts on our students. Vacancies impact students daily by materializing as increased class sizes, lack of substitutes and burnt-out teachers. Wyoming is losing its ability to recruit and retain our quality educators. We know that the most important indicator of student success is a highly-qualified teacher guiding that student’s education.”

Hutcherson blamed a lack of education funding for affecting Wyoming’s ability to keep its high-quality teachers in classrooms, therefore, depriving students of the “equitable, quality education that is their fundamental, constitutionally-protected right as Wyoming citizens.”

Last month, the association filed a lawsuit against the state for possibly underfunding the education system and allegedly violating Wyoming’s constitution.

### **Student enrollment and teacher pay**

The association also conducted a poll earlier this year with Mark Perkins, an independent researcher at the University of Wyoming. The poll, which included responses from over 700 teachers, found that nearly 66% want to leave the teaching profession but

stay due to financial or other reasons. Nearly 14% of educators reported that they were either “likely” or “very likely” to quit teaching, the poll shows.

But on a national scale, it’s murky as to whether or not the teacher shortage is widespread. Some news outlets suggest that it is, while others report that vacancies are localized to rural communities in the United States and the Deep South.

What further complicates teacher shortages in Wyoming is that student enrollment is on the rise as the state’s population has slowly grown.

“My understanding is that we have been trending toward a teacher shortage for years, long before the pandemic,” Chad Auer, Deputy Superintendent of Public Instruction, told the Wyoming Truth. “Additionally, many districts in Wyoming are experiencing growth in student enrollment. Even further, districts are losing experienced teachers to early retirement or career changes.”

The average classroom size in the Cowboy State is about 18 students, a two to three student increase from previously recorded figures, a February report from Wyoming Department of Education states. A 2011 state law recommends an average student-teacher ratio of 16:1 for all classes in kindergarten through third grade.

“Furthermore, when a school is understaffed, the education that children receive is diminished,” Auer said. “Understaffed schools also present safety concerns.”

Teacher salaries also factor into the equation, said Hutcherson of the education association.



*Kimberly Amen is a third-grade teacher at Pioneer Park Elementary School in Cheyenne and vice president of the Wyoming Education Association. She said many teachers don't feel valued as professionals and are expected to do more with less. (Courtesy photo from Amanda Turner)*

“Wyoming’s current education funding model allocates \$7,000 per teacher below the actual cost districts pay to fill positions,” Hutcherson said. “The salaries in our funding model have not been adjusted for inflation in more than a decade. Average annual salaries increased only an average of \$604 per teacher between 2010 and 2022.”

However, an April report from the National Education Association lists an average starting teacher salary in Wyoming at \$46,826, which exceeds the national average of \$41,770 and starting salaries in surrounding states. The association found that a Wyoming teacher with a bachelor’s degree could earn upwards of \$55,813, while a teacher with a master’s degree could earn between \$51,280 to \$67,448. In Wyoming, teacher salaries top out at \$74,513.

Auer acknowledged that Wyoming would “certainly benefit” from upping teacher pay to remain competitive in the region.

### Other school staff vacancies

Data from the Wyoming Association of School Administration shows a shortage of school staff as well. In addition to teacher vacancies, there were 368 unfilled “classified” positions, meaning jobs that don’t require certification by the Professional Teaching Standards Board, at schools statewide.

The Casper Classical Academy, a middle school, currently has six vacancies: one tech job and five education support professional positions, said Rebecca Murray, 46, a certified librarian at the school.

Prior to taking the library job, Murray taught science for a year at Dean Morgan Middle School and taught at Bar Nunn Elementary School for 13 years. She exchanged the classroom for bookshelves due to the overwhelming workload. On top of her own class, Murray helped manage another class for a teacher who was on family medical leave and had no long-term substitute. As a result, she created lesson plans and graded assignments for about 270 students. Murray said she easily worked at least 65 hours a week and earned only \$59,000 a year—even though she holds a master’s degree in curriculum and instruction.

“The biggest impact is on the students directly,” Murray said about staff shortages. “What happens is we don’t have time to plan quality instruction and deliver quality instruction to students to meet their needs. We’re doing other duties or have no one available to provide those resources...and that takes away from learning.”

At Pioneer Park Elementary School, another first-grade class was added at the last

minute because of increasing enrollment, Amen said. She also noted the school district has about 100 fewer substitute teachers compared to the last academic year—and even then, there weren't enough to meet the need.

The average pay for a full-time substitute teacher in Wyoming is around \$124 per day or \$15.50 an hour, according to salary.com. Wyoming's basic state minimum wage is \$5.15 per hour, the lowest in the nation.

Unlike some other educators, Amen plans to remain in the classroom. With only eight years until retirement, she is prepared to stick it out.

"...I think teachers ultimately stay for their students," Amen said, "because this is a calling. We love teaching. We love the students. It's who we are. It's what we do."



*Rebecca Murray works as a certified librarian at the Casper Classical Academy. She left the classroom, having taught as a science and elementary school teacher, because she felt overburdened by the workload. (Courtesy photo from Jennifer Lewis)*

## FOUR MEN NABBED IN GILLETTE SEX TRAFFICKING STING



By Jennifer Kocher  
September 12, 2022

### **Along with citations, sex buyers receive education in the difference between prostitution and trafficking**

GILLETTE, Wyo.—The first buyer is 15 minutes away. He's driving from South Dakota to Gillette to ostensibly have sex with a 16-year-old girl who advertised on a social media site.

What the buyer doesn't realize is that he's been corresponding with a police officer, who is waiting for him in a hotel room as part of a sex trafficking training and operation conducted by the Gillette police.

It's Friday afternoon. The handful of officers have spent the past two days with Terri Markham, executive director of Uprising, a Sheridan nonprofit that provides training in human trafficking prevention. Leading the program is Joe Scaramucci, a detective with the McLennan County Sheriff's Office in Texas. A renowned expert on human

trafficking, he has trained hundreds of local, state and federal law enforcement agencies nationwide.

The buyer is here, Scaramucci announces from his desk in an adjoining hotel room. It's the police officers' cue to jump into action. They unload two suitcases of gear and strap on tactical vests, firearms and Tasers.

Meanwhile, the dozen people in the rooms – police, victim advocates and Markham's crew – silently wait for the knock on the door. One officer stands with his hand on the door knob and his eye on the peep hole.

Minutes later, there's a light knock. The police leap into the hallway and cuff a middle aged, white-haired man. As they lead him into the room, he bears an



A 23-year-old oilfield worker from Casper is cuffed after attempting to solicit sex during the sting operation in Gillette. (Wyoming Truth photo by Jen Kocher)

“enigmatic smile, as if he’s in on a joke and not about to be arrested on a felony charge for soliciting sex from a minor.

### Undiagnosed problem

Sex trafficking in Wyoming is a growing problem. And it’s not going away, Markham says, as long as buyers purchase sex under the guise of prostitution without understanding that between 85% to 95% of sex workers are there under coercion.

It’s hard to gauge the scope of the problem in Wyoming, because many arrests are mischaracterized as prostitution, a misdemeanor. “More often than not,” Markham says, “human trafficking goes unnoticed.”

According to the National Human Trafficking Hotline, 395 Wyoming residents contacted the organization between 2007 and 2020. Of those contacts, 90 trafficking cases were reported. In 2020, 47 victims reached out for help, resulting in 11 reported trafficking cases.

What keeps the human trafficking industry thriving? There’s never a shortage of demand. For this reason, Markham’s organization hosts training programs both to teach law enforcement the difference between prostitution and trafficking and techniques for combatting it. She also schools the buyers on the difference.

### “Wrong place, wrong time”

The buyer’s name is Bruce, and he’s from South Dakota. He doesn’t have a driver’s license with him, and he says he had no idea he’d be meeting a teen for sex. He was in the “wrong place at the wrong time,” he says, and continues to deny any knowledge of his text exchange with Scaramucci—even as Scaramucci reads messages aloud from Bruce’s phone.

In Bruce’s pockets are \$300 cash – the price Scaramucci quoted him– and a condom.

He’s not admitting to anything, Bruce repeats.

This is when Markham and her crew step in. She sits down with Bruce to see if he’ll answer some questions. At her side is Julie Johnson, a sex trafficking survivor, who was exploited by her ex-husband during the decade they were married.

Bruce agrees to talk.

“We’re not here to judge you,” Markham says, “but we want to try to understand what brought you here today.”

Through her research, Markham has found three primary reasons why men purchase sex: loneliness, an unhappy marriage and prior sexual abuse or trauma. What’s more,

nearly all of the people she's interviewed say they are driven by pornography and sex addictions.

Bruce hesitantly confirms that he is unhappily married and was abused as a child by his teenage sister.

"I was held in hotels just like this one," Johnson says, "and I can tell you, I didn't want to be here."

That's the difference between prostitution and sex trafficking: the latter are victims being exploited at someone else's hand whether it's visible or not, Johnson explains.

Bruce agrees to contact the Epik Project, a national nonprofit that works to disrupt the demand that drives sexual exploitation and provide help for those with sex addictions.

### Mitigating demand

Since posting the ad two days ago, Scaramucci has fielded text messages from 79 prospective buyers. Some are just playing games, he notes, while others chicken out. His ad features a young female body in a red thong with her buttocks raised in the air. There is no face or other discernible features. The body could belong to anyone, and in this case, law enforcement purchased the photos from young women who signed waivers agreeing to let their images be used for these purposes.

The police officers watch over Scaramucci's shoulder as he types, marveling at his ability to talk shop.

It took Scaramucci trial and error to master the lingo—and he's made plenty of mistakes.

In an early exchange where he posed as a teenage girl, a buyer asked him what kind of alcoholic beverage "she" would like to drink. Caught off guard, Scaramucci tried to recall what girls drank during his teen years. Zima came to mind.

"Ha, you're a cop," the buyer replied. "Zima hasn't been made in years."

That lesson he learned the hard way.

### Roses and donations

The next buyer knows what he's doing, Scaramucci says. In his messages, he used correct symbols and jargon to clearly lay out his demand: sex without a condom with a woman over age 18. The buyer agreed to pay \$150 in "donations," which is sex-industry speak for dollars. Sometimes people call it "roses."

He, too, forgot to bring his ID and wallet, but agrees to talk to Markham and Johnson. He admits that he's married but has no history of sexual abuse. It's his first time, he insists, which garners an eye roll from Scaramucci.



*Gillette police officers take notes as Scaramucci leads them through a lesson in messaging with buyers, a skill that took him years to get right. (Wyoming Truth photo by Jennifer Kocher)*

“There’s a zero percent chance this is his first time,” Scaramucci says, sotto voce to two of the victim advocates.

Unlike the first buyer, he receives a citation for solicitation— a misdemeanor in Wyoming punishable by no more than six months in prison, a \$750 fine, or both. He’ll appear in circuit court later this month.

He doesn’t seem upset when he accepts his citation. But the third buyer falls apart once the cuffs go on; he looks around the room, trying to process what’s happening.

“I work a lot,” he says through tears. “I was just trying to unwind.”

He’s 23 and works in the oil field. He’s driven from Casper and cries even harder when Johnson shares her story.

He had no idea that this arrangement might not be a consensual transaction between two adults as advertised. He swears he’ll never do it again.

The fourth buyer shows less remorse. He suspected that it might not be consensual, but figured it was okay because he was paying fair and square. He, too, admits he’s here out of loneliness and because it’s hard for him to meet and talk to women.

“It’s because of my sparkly personality,” he deadpans, and then agrees to get help.

Markham is torn for the simple reason that the fourth buyer seemed to know that women were being exploited, yet still chose to purchase sex. Unless demand is squelched, she says, sex trafficking will flourish in Wyoming and beyond.

“We just have to keep pushing back and trying to educate buyers,” Markham says. “That’s the only way to make progress.”



*A Gillette man nabbed in the sting operation listens to Uprising Executive Director Terri Markham (left) and sex trafficking survivor Julie Johnson explain that between 85% to 95% of sex workers are not there on their own volition but are being exploited at the hands of others. (Wyoming Truth photo by Jennifer Kocher)*

# FEATURED PHOTO



*A cowboy awaits his turn in the bareback riding rodeo event at Cheyenne Frontier Days, which continue through July 31. (Wyoming Truth photo by Cindy Smith)*



# Be Sure To Check Out Our Regular Columns

## THE WEEKLY ROUNDUP WITH GRACE FOULK WATCH THE LATEST WYOMING NEWS

Reports on Wyoming news throughout the state.

## FRIDAY FOCUS

An in-depth look at Wyoming's hottest topics.

### A WINDOW ON THE WORLD WITH MATT STIRN

A Wyoming photographer explores the beyond.

### WYOMING WONDERS WITH AMBER GIBSON

Featuring the best and brightest of Wyoming.

### WILD WEST WITH CASSIE CRAVEN

Opinions from a former prosecutor and public defender on the leading issues in Wyoming.

Pressed for time? No worries. Join us every Friday for a new episode of the 60-Second Wyoming Week in Review. A podcast featuring a collection of headlines from leading news sources around Wyoming.



# THE SECRET BEHIND GOV. MARK GORDON'S ENDURING POPULARITY



By Jacob Gardenswartz  
October 10, 2022

**While other GOP state leaders have elevated culture war issues, Gordon has prioritized local matters, earned the widespread support of voters — and made some enemies in the process**

In August, Wyoming Republicans again nominated Gov. Mark Gordon for governor, with the incumbent receiving nearly two-thirds of the vote in his campaign against GOP challengers Rex Rammell and Brent Bien.

During the 2018 GOP primary for what would become his first term in office, Gordon barely squeaked out a victory, earning just one-third of the total vote with the top challengers — Harriet Hageman among them — splitting the votes of those who preferred a more conservative candidate.

Gordon's moderate governing style over the

past four years initially earned him few friends in the statehouse. In late 2021, then-Rep. Scott Clem (R-Gillette) labeled him a "tyrant" for instituting a mask mandate during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Yet a Morning Consult poll released in July found Gordon to be the most popular governor in the nation, tied with Vermont Gov. Phil Scott at 74 percent approval and a record-low 17 percent disapproval. With such widespread support, Gordon sailed through his primary race and is expected to easily defeat Democrat Theresa Livingston in the Nov. 8 general election.

What explains Gordon's popularity? So far, Gordon has succeeded in balancing support for populist conservatism with a more moderate and pragmatic governing style.

While some other Republican governors have sought to raise their national profiles through cable news appearances and political stunts, Gordon's focus has been on the people of Wyoming, according to the governor's office.

"Governor Gordon's policies and priorities – support for Wyoming's energy and ag industries, his efforts to keep Wyoming on a stable fiscal path, and his belief in efficient, effective and accountable government – are a reflection of what he believes best serves the state's people," Gordon spokesman Michael Pearlman said in a statement to the Wyoming Truth. "Regardless of poll numbers, he will continue to make decisions based on what he believes is best for Wyoming's people and for the future of the state."

### Mark Gordon's East-meets-West upbringing

Though Gordon's campaign website notes he "grew up on the family ranch in Wyoming," he was born in New York City to a family with deep ties to the East Coast elite — his paternal grandmother was Massachusetts heiress-philanthropist Louise Ayer Hatheway and aunt was socialite Jean Gordon.

Gordon, 65, left his childhood ranch for New Hampshire's St. Paul's School as a teenager, and later attended Middlebury College, a premier liberal arts institution in Vermont. His contrasting New England and Mountain West upbringing is something that "constantly comes up" in a state where "you're either 'local' or you are 'from away,'" Gordon said in an interview last year.

After working on the ranch and in the oil and gas industry for much of his life,

Gordon's first foray into politics came in 2008 when he waged an unsuccessful bid to represent Wyoming in the U.S. House of Representatives. That campaign brought with it "criticism among rank-and-file Republicans and even some dark speculation that he is really a stalking horse, a so-called 'RINO' (Republican In Name Only) for the Democrats," according to contemporaneous reporting.

Among the biggest red flags for some in the Wyoming GOP were Gordon's political contributions to Democrats: \$1,000 to Democrat Kathy Karpan in 1996, \$2,000 to John Kerry's presidential campaign in 2000 and \$2,500 to the Democratic National Committee in 2004. Gordon ultimately lost the 2008 Republican primary to Cynthia Lummis, who now represents Wyoming in the U.S. Senate; data from the Federal Elections Commission shows Gordon hasn't contributed to Democrats or groups aligned with them since 2006.

In 2012, Gordon was appointed state treasurer by Gov. Matt Mead after the incumbent died in office, and handily won



*First Lady Jennie Gordon, wife of Gov. Mark Gordon, manages the daily operations of Merlin Ranch, the Gordon family's cattle ranch in Buffalo, Wyoming. (Photo via Friends of Mark Gordon)*

reelection for a full term in 2014. When Lummis ran for Senate in 2016, Gordon declined to seek her House seat, opting instead to run for governor in 2018. Though that campaign proved difficult, Gordon would soon realize that governing amid the pandemic was much harder.

### **A tough primary battle, and an even tougher war against COVID-19**

On Aug. 21, 2018, Gordon won the Republican nomination for Wyoming governor, beating GOP mega-donor Foster Friess and Hageman by only seven points. That November, he easily took the general election in the predominately-Republican state.

But Gordon's victory set him on a collision course with then-President Donald Trump, who saw Friess as more aligned with his policies and endorsed him as "Strong on Crime, Borders & 2nd Amendment."

"President Trump is doing great things that are important for Wyoming in terms of getting our economy going, and all of that," Gordon said after winning the primary. "But in the end, I think people in Wyoming concentrated on who's got the experience, who's got the record and who's got the best message going forward for Wyoming."

Gordon's primary victory came in part with the help of Democrats and Independents who had switched parties to support him, and the issue of crossover voting became a priority for those he'd defeated.

Conservative lawmakers tried to change the election rules to ban crossover voting. Even before Gordon was inaugurated, Sen. Bo Biteman (R-Ranchester) introduced a bill to ban party changes after May 1 of an election year. The measure and others like it

failed to become law, but demonstrated the icy relationship Gordon would face with the conservative majorities in the Wyoming House and Senate.

As the pandemic began, Gordon sought to thread the needle between protecting his constituents and satisfying Wyomingites' anti-government sentiments. He initially resisted instituting a statewide mask mandate, but closed some businesses and schools to reduce the virus's spread. As a result, he faced protesters jeering outside the State Capitol, demanding he reopen Wyoming's economy.

In November of 2020, Gordon tested positive for COVID and soon mandated masks. Though the statewide order was rescinded within a few months, the decision further emboldened Wyomingites who opposed any sort of governmental action against COVID—and opened Gordon up to another line of attack.

But with the worst of the pandemic now in the past, Gordon's relationship with the state party appears to have thawed as none of his 2018 opponents challenged him this year.

In a statement, Gordon's office highlighted his efforts to promote in-person learning during the pandemic, increase energy production and rein in the state budget.

"Gordon is coming out strong from the beginning," said Rep. Dan Zwonitzer (R-Cheyenne). "Over the last decade, we've seen an increasing creep of putting legislative bills into the budget bill. I think this is a good pushback."

Gordon nonetheless continued to face attacks from some on the right, though this time about a new topic: Rep. Liz Cheney.

### Gordon's latest gambit: neutrality

In 2020, when Trump began to claim victory for an election he'd lost, Gordon tried out a new strategy: neutrality.

Though the Associated Press had called the race for Joe Biden, Gordon said he was withholding his congratulations to the winner until "a result is confirmed," not acknowledging Biden's victory while also not going so far as to support Trump's claims.

In December 2020, as some GOP governors filed lawsuits seeking to throw out the election results in battleground states, Gordon sounded supportive. "President Trump has the right to bring electoral issues for resolution in the U.S. judicial system," he said in a statement at the time. "I, along with Wyoming voters, overwhelmingly supported President Trump through our electoral process."

But though his public statements demonstrated fealty to Trump, Gordon's actions showed otherwise. Seventeen GOP-controlled states signed onto the lawsuit, spearheaded by Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton. Wyoming did not.

Then came Jan. 6, when a pro-Trump mob stormed the U.S. Capitol seeking to halt the Electoral College certification of Biden's win. Gordon's condemnation was swift: the violence "dishonors our legacy," he said. "Interfering with the peaceful transfer of power is an affront to the very Constitution that has made our country what it is." Later that month, he sent upwards of 100 members of the Wyoming National Guard to Washington to assist with security during Biden's inauguration.

If Trump was already displeased with



*Pictured with Rep. Liz Cheney in 2019, Gov. Mark Gordon remained neutral in her bitter 2022 GOP primary race against Trump-backed Harriet Hageman. (Photo via Facebook / Rep. Liz Cheney)*

Gordon for beating Friess in 2018, Gordon's refusal to bolster Trump's unproven claims of election fraud further strained their relationship. "You have a governor that has not been too helpful, I must tell you," Trump told a Wyoming radio broadcaster shortly before his May rally in Casper for Hageman.

As Trump did everything he could to oust Cheney, Gordon again remained neutral, declining to endorse Hageman and again opening himself up to attacks from his GOP challengers.

"When we have somebody like Liz Cheney, who has disgraced the state of Wyoming, I certainly, as governor, would take a position against her," Rammell said during the gubernatorial primary debate last summer.

"Governors typically don't get involved in races, and I'm [not] going to do that now," Gordon responded.

"When President Trump called me and said, 'Please come to my rally,' I said, 'I'm glad to meet you at the airport, President Trump, but I am not going to take sides in this particular

race.”

Most recently, Gordon again forged a middle-of-the-road path by appointing Karl Allred to serve as interim Wyoming Secretary of State, until Chuck Grey, who is running unopposed, is officially elected in November. While Marti Halverson, former state lawmaker and prominent anti-abortion activist promised to overhaul state elections in her application for the position, Allred sought to preserve the status quo.

Looking forward, Gordon's office said in its statement that the governor is focused on the issues that matter to Wyoming, citing workforce development and K-12 education

as two top priorities for his next term.

Gordon's pragmatic approach has resonated not just with Wyomingites but also with the Republican establishment. He may not be Trump's favorite GOP governor, but he's caught the eye of other national leaders.

“Governor Gordon has delivered on his promises, cut wasteful spending and beat back Joe Biden's attempts to tear down Wyoming's oil and gas industry,” said Chris Gustafson, spokesman for the Republican Governors Association. “Wyoming is in a stronger position under Governor Gordon and Wyomingites look forward to four more years of strong leadership and prosperity.”

**TURQUOISE**



# CUSTOM LEATHER PRODUCTS

## CONTACT

*Hailey Hampton*  
307-630-7016

Visit us on Facebook



Made  
in  
Wyoming

# Natural Skin Products


Chemical, Preservative & Perfume Free



Handmade With  
Only Natural Ingredients

 [Facebook.com/wylandoflavender](https://www.facebook.com/wylandoflavender)

 [wylandoflavender@gmail.com](mailto:wylandoflavender@gmail.com)

 307.547.2315

EST **tandy**<sup>®</sup> 1919  
LEATHER



## VISIT US IN CHEYENNE

3701 E Lincolnway  
Cheyenne, WY 82001  
Phone: 307-632-1761

HOURS:  
M-F 9 am to 6 pm  
Sat. 10 am to 4 pm

[TANDYLEATHER.COM](http://TANDYLEATHER.COM)