

Voices from the Valley: Gwen Kircher

By: **SHERRI CORNETT** | May 6, 2018



Jim Krieg

For Gwen Kircher, giving back to the community is a concept that her mother drilled into her many years ago.

Voices from the Valley is an occasional series of conversations between Sherri Cornett and Billings-area leaders who are committed to creating a vibrant community for all.

Gwen Kircher’s life experiences have given her much to share. Our conversation flowed quickly, from being good neighbors to policy making, to history, race and class. All of these topics appertain to her roles as the current chair of the Montana Advisory Committee to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights and a past member of the Billings Human Relations Commission.

Sherri Cornett: Gwen, giving back to our communities and the role of female family members in our lives are frequent topics in these Voices from the Valley conversations.

Gwen Kircher: I am sure they are. My mother worked with the United Way and other service organizations. She said, “It doesn’t matter how poor you get to be, you have to always give back to society.” It means caring about your neighbors and actually loving your neighbor as yourself.

Sherri: Has your work with the civil rights and human relations commissions shown you how we could do this better?

Gwen: We need more supportive policies, but, to do so, students need to be taught what the Bill of Rights and the Constitution say and how the three branches of government form checks and balances for each other. We need to remember that it is the legislature that writes and passes laws. Without understanding all of this, we cannot hold policy-makers and politicians accountable, to make sure they make humane laws.

Sherri: That reminds me that the man who wrote songs for “School House Rock” — like “**I’m Just a Bill**,” the delightful introduction to the legislative process for children — recently died.

Gwen: That TV show accentuated a lot of important concepts. Another thing that we need to realize is that in the ‘60s, your enemy was more likely to get in your face and say, “I don’t want you to live next door, go to my school, get close to me in my life. I don’t want to see you.” Now, I hear, “I love you and other people,” but then hateful things are done in private. It seems more dangerous now, when you don’t really know who people are. And, quite often, they don’t see their own racism.

Sherri: Did growing up in Kentucky give you a particular perspective on race?

Gwen: Yes. Systemic racism came about after the Civil War. The landowners quickly realized that if the masses of poor white people connected with the recently freed black people, they would be powerful and demand changes. To drive a wedge between these groups, the white people were often told, “You may be poor, but at least you are white.”

Sherri: What did your mother say about that?

Gwen: My mother did not allow us to distinguish anyone as from a particular race. We don’t like to talk about class in our country, but we were aware of it in Lexington. It means different things in different communities. I grew up in a family that had all the things that middle-class white families would have had at that time, but we were considered upper class for black America.

Sherri: My grandparents and parents all worked — as a mechanic, a refinery worker, a first-grade teacher, a seamstress, an engineer, a secretary. What I later came to understand as middle-class aspirations and comforts — a house, public schools with good teachers and being able to pay off college debt — seem less attainable now.

Gwen: In the 1980s, the middle class took a huge hit when corporations were deregulated and CEOs were allowed to keep more of the profits. Now the disparity in salaries between corporate leaders and workers is even wider. More people have to have two to three jobs to support themselves and their families, to even dream of those comforts, particularly owning a home. In a country that has so much money, and still so many homeless ... there is something wrong with that picture.

Sherri: You have said that you would rather live here than back in the East. Why is that?

Gwen: It is for unfortunate reasons, but I feel like I have more freedom here than in the east. As a black woman, I am less hated than a Native American might be. Their history is more complex and horrific. I do have people yelling the “N” word out at me from their cars, but I am somewhat overlooked, less a target.

Sherri: How do you respond to such events?

Gwen: I realize that, even if it is bad and they know it is bad, some people would rather hold onto such behavior because it is familiar. This is where faith and God come into play for me. Through Him, I am pushed to learn more and to be a better neighbor.



With degrees in political science and art and a long history of advocacy work, Sherri Cornett’s passion for dialogue and community has found outlets in the national and international social-justice-themed exhibitions she curates, her own art and the organizations and causes into which she contributes her energy and leadership. After 14 moves, Cornett finally found her home in Billings in 1993.
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