Danny Powers

Keeps Ridgway's Town Parks Green and Gorgeous



If you've ever been lucky enough to spend some time in Ridgway's Hartwell Park, with its lush lawns and pools of shade cast by towering cottonwood trees, surely you've seen park superintendent Danny Powers there from time to time, clad in shorts and tank top, tending to his lovely, leafy domain. Powers has always had a thing for trees. Working as a landscaper and caretaker back in Texas before he landed his job with the Town of Ridgway, he had a client with a 400-acre spread where a "monster" oak tree grew that was 22 feet around. It marked the spot where Sam Houston (the first president of the Republic of Texas) had signed a treaty with the Cherokees and other bands of East Texas Indians in 1936. As Powers tended to the ancient tree, "I swore I could feel the life in it," he said. "It was breathtaking."

The Methodist Home for Children in Waco, Texas, where Powers grew up, was full of trees like that. Powers' father, a Cherokee Indian, was violent when he drank. So from the age of five, Powers was raised at the 125-year-old institution that today provides foster care and outreach centers across Texas and New Mexico. Back then, in the 1950s, the home was a world unto itself – with a beautiful 30-acre campus surrounded by woods and creeks – where 550 kids were housed in 28 dorms. It had its own farm and ranch, where the boys grew and raised their own food. And for a long time, it also had its own school.

The kids were treated to a secure, safe, and very strict upbringing. With 550 kids on campus, "if you let anyone get away with something you would have anarchy," Powers said. "They believed in corporal punishment and the rules were written in stone. If you broke the rules you were gonna get licked." Powers found solace in the beauty of the place. "I would take my tennis shoes after lunch on Sunday, go down in the woods and walk through the creeks thanking the creator," he said. "Connection to nature was paramount in my life."Powers played soccer and baseball in high school and went to college at Southern Methodist University on a baseball scholarship. Here, he experienced a "rude awakening" when for the first time in his life, he was surrounded by kids that could actually buy anything they wanted to. However, "It did not get in my heart," he said. "The greed did not set in with me."

After college, Powers set out looking for adventure and found it as a galley worker on the Fantome, a 292-foot historic wooden schooner turned cruise ship that then plied the waters of the Caribbean. Here, he mastered the art of swaying back and forth as he carried trays of food to hungry passengers."I met so many wonderful people," he said. "It was one of the most amazing adventures a young man could have." (Years later, Hurricane Mitch and its 180-mile-per-hour winds hunted the Fantome down, off the coast of Honduras, killing all souls on board. Powers cried when he heard the news.) Powers' greatest life adventure awaited him in Ft. Worth, Texas, after he had disembarked the Fantome for the final time. He remembers everything about the night he met Jeanie, the woman who became his wife. "I went to a party, and I was standing there, when in walked this beautiful girl, with beautiful hair. I could feel that aura," he said, still awed at the thought. It turned out they had a lot in common – Jeanie had been raised in the Independent Order of Odd Fellows Orphan's Home in Corsicana, Texas. The two have now been married for 39 years.

They moved to Ridgway from Ft. Worth 18 years ago. At the time, they thought that they were just passing through, but almost right away, Powers got offered the position of park superintendent and agreed to take it, as long as he could do things his way. "I don't use poisons of any kind," he explained. "I let them know I do not use poisons – I will not be around it." The Town supported his ideals, and Powers is proud to say that "we have been 18 years organic in all the town parks." Things have changed quite a bit in Ridgway since those days.

When Powers first came on board, looking after Hartwell Park was his main job. Today, his to-do list has sprouted new shoots to encompass Cottonwood Park, Heritage Park, Weaver Memorial Park, and the town-owned soccer fields near Solar Ranch. Powers feels lucky to lead a crew of "unbelievable workers" who are all pulling together to keep Ridgway's parks beautiful and healthy. "It's a wonderful thing," he said. "You can't do it by yourself."Today, the 127-year-old cottonwood trees in Hartwell Park are thriving, along with every other living thing that grows there, thanks to Powers' green thumb. "I love it that I get to work with the planet," he said. "And I love the fact that I can hug a tree and believe it's alive." -Samantha Wright



Jen Coates

The Secret of Her Success

It's tough to get Jen Coates to walk away from her standing desk with its views of Hartwell Park and the Cimarron Range long enough to sit down and reflect on her decade-long career with the Town of Ridgway. But once she does, she has a quiet revelation: "No wonder I'm tired!" Over the years, as Coates' position with the Town of Ridgway has morphed from intern/assistant planner, to town planner, to town planner/manager, she has seen some whopping projects through to completion. There's been the "Lake O" water augmentation project, the development of an entire Land Use Plan, and the historic business downtown plan that eventually morphed into the extensive transformation of downtown Ridgway that is currently well underway. Along the way, Coates has also helped launch the Ridgway Creative District, Main Street and Space to Create initiatives, among other things, along with her myriad day-to-day duties. It's all been driven, she says, by a passion for public policy and community-building. "At the local level you can apply politics, policy and governance in a way that nurtures and grows a community in a really positive way," she explained.

Coates grew up on a grain farm in central Illinois, the sixth of seven siblings in a close-knit family. There was not much to do in central Illinois – no mountains to climb. The rivers were muddy, and the skies weren't as alive as they feel in Ridgway. There was gray haze, and lots of mall shopping. But life on the farm was fun. "Dad had us working in the fields," Coates recalled. "In the summers we would hoe weeds out of beans." When she got a little older, she worked for a number of summers at the state capitol in Springfield, Ill., where she developed a love-hate relationship with politics that persists to this day. Grain prices were low and money was tight, but Coates' parents put a priority on making sure all of their kids got a college education. They borrowed money from other family members, and borrowed against the farm, to make it happen. Coates attended the University of Missouri in Columbia, where she studied political science and Spanish. After college, Coates moved to Phoenix, Ariz. and worked for a venture capital-funded company that was developing a noninvasive glucose meter for diabetes management. The job required her to deal with the Federal Drug Administration – filing paperwork, complying with regulations and reporting on the results of clinical trials she was helping to administer across the country. Her coworkers included chemists, scientists, physicists and nurses from around the world. "For this girl from central Illinois, to be working with people from Kenya, Vietnam, Cambodia, the Middle East and Germany – it was so fun. I loved it, and my boss was amazing," she said.

Coates met her husband, Cris, through a mutual friend. Together they moved from Phoenix to Durango, where Coates pursued a Master's Degree in Political Science through the University of Colorado Denver's Center for New Directions in Politics and Public Policy. She was accepted into the "Best and the Brightest" program, which matches graduate students with small, rural governmental jurisdictions in Colorado for a two-year internship as they work toward completion of their degree. Through this program she landed a two-year internship with the Town of Ridgway in 2006. For Coates, it was a dream job in a dream location. "I have always loved it here," she said. "When we lived in Phoenix we vacationed in Telluride and Durango, but I love this valley area most – its proximity to the mountains, its openness, the size of the town. It has been great. It has been such a gift for me to be able to be here." Ten years have flown by, and now, a new Best and Brightest intern (Lu Hauger) has come on board to assist Coates as Ridgway gears up for its next big wave of transformation. "We went through a period of expansive growth, the recession, and now things are coming back," Coates reflected. "In 10 years, we have come full circle." Looking back on everything she has accomplished during her time here, Coates says, "It's a real testament to the vision and direction of an amazing and supportive council. Nothing happens without a council like that."

She also credits the town's incredible staff, and the willingness of the community to stay involved in the process. Coates has always placed a priority on opening the doors of Town Hall so it's not a place for government bureaucracy, but for community engagement. "That is so important for a local government – especially in tough times," she said. "If you have citizens weighing in, it will take more time, but it's so important to keep community informed and at the table." Through it all, Coates has managed to stay close to her extended family (including 20 nieces and nephews!), and has faithfully traveled to Phoenix every 4-6 weeks to help take care of her dad, who progressed through dementia and Alzheimer's disease for nearly 10 years, until he passed away in late 2014. She stays sane by running a lot, hiking, camping, yoga and taking lots of weekend getaways. Most importantly, "I have a very awesome, understanding, loving husband," she said. "He cooks for me every night, and he will call me out when it's time to stop working, or else I won't stop." Coates loves the momentum and energy in Ridgway these days. "I have always felt like Ridgway has created it's own place and space," she said. "This community always amazes me. It always makes what feels to be the right decision, collectively. This community is such a great example of how things can work in a really good way."

-Samantha Wright



Joanne Fagan

Engineering Ridgway's Future

Brainy, self-possessed and superbly competent, the Town of Ridgway's staff engineer Joanne Fagan knows how to get things done – on schedule, on budget, and with no drama. In a profession dominated by men, Fagan is often the only woman in the room or on the work site, but this has never fazed her. "I don't think it's any more difficult being a woman in this field," she said. "You build a rapport with people, and do your thing, and do it well." Fagan grew up in Swampscott, Mass., a "provincial" town 15 miles up the coast from Boston in an area known as the North Shore. She is a third-generation engineer, but the first in her family to actually earn a living doing it. Her grandfather worked briefly for the prominent engineering services company Stone and Webster, before starting up a furniture factory where her dad, schooled as an electrical engineer, also spent his career.

Fagan was cut from the same cloth; she's been a STEM girl since day one. "I am better at pictures than words, so science stuff just looked easier," she said. She studied engineering at Tufts and went on to get her graduate degree at Northwestern University in Chicago. During her time in the Windy City, Fagan fell in love...with the blues. She lived in a neighborhood along Lake Michigan, and hung out at a local blues joint there called Mulligan's that was frequented by the likes of Coco Taylor and Buddy Guy. "I didn't realize at the time that it wasn't 'just' a neighborhood bar," she laughed. After college, she headed out west and eventually found her way to the North Fork Valley in southwestern Colorado, where she hung out a shingle and went into business for herself. "I was young and single, and figured if I could make $50 a day I wouldn't starve. And it worked," she said.

For three or four years, before things got too busy with her consulting work, she deejayed an early morning show at KVNF (Paonia's public radio station) that featured a mix of new age music and the news, and a late night show where she spun her favorite blues tunes. Fagan started consulting for the Town of Ridgway in the mid-80s. The town's facilities were pretty spartan back in those days – "Town Hall was in a trailer," Fagan recalled – and its politics were in upheaval. A recent recall election had replaced the entire town council. But Fagan's work was well-received, and she enjoyed a steady diet of consulting work with the town over the next two decades, doing a lot of subdivision work at Ridgway USA, Solar Ranches, Cottonwood Creek and the Marie Scott Subdivision.

Around 2005, Fagan officially hired on and became a Town of Ridgway employee. She has since overseen a parade of projects – from pavement and sidewalk improvements to the massive water storage augmentation project at Lake O – as Ridgway has transformed from a sleepy little ranching town to the dynamic and progressive community it is today. The joint Ridgway/CDOT Highway & Downtown Improvement Project (otherwise known as RAMP) that is slated to break ground next summer will perhaps be Fagan's pièce de résistance. As town engineer, she has been up to her eyeballs in the project since its very inception, running interference between CDOT and the town as the two entities determine how to implement the town's downtown infrastructure improvement plan while simultaneously improving the Highway 62 corridor through town. As Ridgway Town Attorney John Kappa once said, "At least Joanne speaks CDOT." (Fagan's husband, Ron Alexander, is a retired CDOT employee.) "It is going to be a balancing act," Fagan predicted. "There are going to be impacts, but we are trying to make it so we can get it done and keep businesses alive. It's a challenge, spending a lot of time looking at schedules, the "constructability" of the town's vision, and trying to figure out how to put it all together." But Fagan predicts that the final outcome will be well worth all the headaches and hassles. "I think it will bring vibrancy to downtown and hopefully to the community as a whole," she said.

-Samantha Wright

Legally Speaking With John Kappa



If there were ever an award for who's attended the most Ridgway Town Council meetings (and perhaps there should be!), John Kappa would probably win it. Kappa served as Ridgway's town attorney for almost four decades – from 1979 until his retirement in February 2016 – through at least six mayors and more town councilors than he can recall. Back in the early days, before the Town of Ridgway had much of a staff, the town council had to take care of much of the routine business that a town manager would typically take care of today. "So the meetings went on forever," he recalls. Kappa sat through them all – sometimes well past midnight. "It was awful," he groaned at the memory. Now that the town has a robust and efficient professional staff, Ridgway's Town Council meetings are rarely the marathon sessions that they once were – but can certainly still test the limits of physical and mental endurance from time to time.

Kappa never dreamed of lawyering when he was growing up in suburban Minneapolis. Instead, he studied aerospace engineering at Iowa State University before joining the Navy to become a nuclear submarine officer from 1966-1971. He was assigned to the USS George Washington, the world's first operational ballistic missile submarine, where he served undersea for two months at a time, with a home port in New London, Conn. and an advance base in Holy Loch, Scotland. "We hid and waited for a signal to launch missiles at the Soviet Union," he explained. "You worked hard when you were on watch, and you were always tired, but I'm glad I did it." When Kappa was off-duty, he loved to ski and golf. He also spent a lot of time at the Officer's Club at Ft. Story in Virginia Beach, where they had bands out on the beach every Friday and Saturday night. Here, he fell for a girl named Barbara from Virginia. They got married in 1971.

When Kappa completed his military service, he headed to Boulder, Colo. with his bride to attend law school. "I wanted to live in Colorado so I could ski, and I figured if I went to law school I could work anywhere," he said. Besides which, "Law school was a lot easier than engineering." As a law student, Kappa clerked for the Colorado Municipal League, an experience that steered him in the direction of municipal law. Once he graduated, he worked in Grand Junction for a year then landed a job as Montrose City Attorney in 1975. For some time, Kappa worked as a "circuit-riding" town attorney, offering his services in up to five additional municipalities across the Western Slope. "I spent a lot of time on the road and at meetings," he recalled. "Each town has its own culture – they are all a little different...some a lot different."

Kappa added Ridgway to the mix in 1979, signing on as its town attorney back in the days when Town Hall was an old mobile home. His first task was to write the town code. "All they had was a model code that the Colorado Municipal League had put out – and they hadn't even adapted it for Ridgway," he said. Things remained pretty low-key until Ridgway started experiencing more development in the '80s and '90s. "Then there was a whole different set of things to deal with," Kappa said. "And the water rights stuff has always been a source of interesting things to do." Thankfully, Ridgway's water rights were never precarious – "There was plenty of water, even though we had a couple of dry years," he said. But competition for water from downstream users has increased dramatically in recent years. "The administration of water is getting tighter and tighter all the time." The advent of legalized marijuana in Colorado provided more interesting grist for the mill. "It wasn't a big problem, but it created a lot of work," Kappa said.

Being in the middle of the politics goes with the territory of being a town attorney. But for Kappa, Ridgway was always about the least stressful of the towns he worked for. "All of the councils and staff were all working together," he said. "There were no intra-council battles. That is the most uncomfortable for the attorney. Ridgway has been blessed with some great people." Now that he's retired, Kappa anticipates selling his house on the Black Canyon Golf Course in Montrose in the not too distant future. These days, he prefers to spend time at Virginia Beach – where he and Barbara met all those years ago, and where they have owned a second home since the 1980s. Their daughter Kimberly and young grandchildren (Marina and Aiden) live in Raleigh, about 200 miles away. And the ocean is always calling. Kappa loves to head out to the beach for a walk or a run, or perhaps go swimming if the water is warm enough. Sometimes, he'll take his sea kayak out and catch some blue crabs. "Some years are better than others for them," he said. "One year we caught so many I got tired of them." Not a bad problem to have.

-Samantha wright



Keeping Town Hall Beautiful from Within

Jacquie Mace

Jacquie Mace does windows. She also does bathrooms. And floors. And whatever else it takes to keep the Ridgway Town Hall and other town facilities spic and span. She's got this cleaning gig down to a fine art – she's been the Town of Ridgway's janitor for over a quarter-century. Some people might turn up their noses at this kind of work. But Mace, who had an entire first career in corporate America before moving to Ridgway in 1990, finds janitorial work meditative, and delightfully unstressful. Mace has always been an early riser. She's up at 4 a.m., and making her janitorial rounds for the Town of Ridgway by around 6 a.m. Her first stop is usually the Town shop, where she makes sure the bathroom is nice and clean. Then she opens the park bathrooms. Finally, it's off to Town Hall, where she cleans all the floors, the bathrooms, and whatever else needs attention on a daily basis."I try to do the best job I can," Mace said. "I enjoy doing it."

Mace grew up in Clintwood, Va. a little town tucked w-a-a-a-y back in the hilly Appalachian countryside. Mace's family kept a cow named Betsy for milking, and it was Mace's job as a girl to churn the butter in a wooden churn. There wasn't much money to go around. Mace sewed her slips and undies out of flower sacks. She still remembers her first store-bought dress, purchased for her 8th grade graduation. "Dad went to the store. It was a yellow dress. It was $15 and he had to put it on credit." Mace was "a little different" as a child. She preferred reading books to watching TV or listening to the Grand Ole Opry on the radio. Raised in a town full of Baptists, Mace converted to Catholicism after a couple of nuns moved to her town. "I love the Latin mass," she said. "I was a little bit of a turncoat." (Today, she adds, "I am sort of a Taoist/ Zen/ Catholic.")

As soon as Mace was old enough, she left Clintwood behind to go to college and save the world, but ended up with a corporate job at General Foods in Jacksonville, Fla.

"It was a very hard company to get into," she said. "I called them every day until they hired me. I literally called them every day. After about three weeks they hired me." She started out in the packing area and worked her way up into quality control. Her original plan was to work there for just one year, to get enough money and hit the road. "At one time I was going to drop out, build a cabin and live in Alaska, just like the old Foxfire books," she said. Instead, Mace stayed at General Foods for almost 23 years. She discovered Ridgway in the late '70s after her brother and his wife moved to the area. "I came through and said, "Oh, my God, I want to live here one day! Oh, I am in love!"

In 1989, as luck would have it, her company was in the process of restructuring, and gave her the option of retiring early. "It was quite a risk," she said. "I was only 45, and I thought, 'What am I going to do? At that time people were working two and three jobs to make ends meet in Ridgway." But she took a deep breath, and made the leap.Mace remembers the exact day she moved to Ridgway: March 4, 1990. When she got to town, she took a few months off to explore her options. "I wanted to do something totally different," she recalled. "I sorta wanted to be my own boss. I had been through a lot of stress."

Mace did a little research, and discovered that janitorial work is ranked as one of the least stressful occupations (right up there with technical writing). A friend taught her the ropes of stripping and waxing floors, and in 1991, Mace got her first janitorial contract to clean the Ridgway Town Hall. She's been keeping things spic and span there ever since. Mace met her life partner Sam Ewing at a Firemen's Dance in Ridgway in 1992. She hadn't dated in two years, and was a little nervous about the whole thing. Ewing, a Ridgway native who works for the Ouray County Road and Bridge Department, called her three times before she finally agreed to go out with him. They have been together now for almost 25 years. They share a cabin on 40 acres out on Dallas Creek, where Mace has learned how to irrigate and keeps an eye on the birds and wildlife when she's not at work. "I can lay in my bed and see the moon coming up over the Cimarrons," she said. "I wake up every day and say 'Thank you, thank you, thank you.' I have been here in Ridgway 27 years and I am still in awe."

What Mace loves best about her job is that feeling of autonomy. One of these days, she might retire, but she's not in any hurry. But once she does put away that mop for good, she's got some things she'd like to do. There's that book project that's been on the back burner for about 50 years. "And Sam and I like to travel," she said. "We love the back roads, the two lanes, the blue highways, small towns, museums, history. I would like to do more yoga and tai chi. And I'd love to spend more time just enjoying nature," she added. "I love nature with a passion. I just get consumed with the beauty around me."

-Samantha Wright



Out and About with Jeff Rivera

If you're hoping to track down Jeff Rivera, don't bother looking at the Ridgway Town Hall. The eight-year veteran of Ridgway's public works department is usually out in the field. "I do a little bit of everything – streets, water taps, sewer. Something different every day," he said. Rivera was born and raised in Del Norte, Colo., the eldest of three children. His family has deep roots in the San Luis Valley's farming community, going all the way back to the 1800s on his father's side. One of his great-grandmothers was a Ute Indian. Rivera's father worked at the Homestead Mine in Creede. "My dad didn't want me to work in the mines," Rivera said. Instead, he joined the army in 1986, serving in Honduras as an infantry squadron leader and M60 gunner in the 82nd Airborne Division. "It made me who I am today," Rivera said.

In 1989, Rivera married his high school sweetheart, mustered out of the military and moved to Grand Junction where he and his bride Dawn soon started a family. Rivera supported his growing brood as a forklift operator in the warehouse department at Pepsi Cola's bottling plant there. While he's never been much of a soda drinker, "It was interesting and fun," learning how the fizzy drinks were manufactured, he said. When Pepsi-Cola stopped bottling and canning in Grand Junction, Rivera found a new job working for a local siding supply company. The work suited him and eventually, he launched his own contracting company, Rivera Siding. His family had by that time moved to Montrose, but much of Rivera's work happened in and around Telluride. "It was booming," Rivera said. "Things were going pretty good until the last months of 2007. Then, everything came to a stop. I decided I needed to switch gears and find something more steady."

In the spring of 2008, Rivera hired on with the Town of Ridgway's public works department. He enjoys the variety that comes with his job. "I like working with people, talking with the public, and learning from my coworkers," he said. Lately, Rivera has been deeply involved in the Town of Ridgway's water augmentation project at Lake O – which he says has got to be one of the most beautiful work sites on the planet. Now he's working more on "Street Scape stuff," which is likely to keep him busy for a good long time. "There will be a lot going on," he predicted. "But when it's done it's going to be awesome."

Rivera's kids have long since left the nest. Daughter Recca just got married and "is taking care of little ones," Rivera said. Older son Eric has three kids of his own and has gone back to his family's agricultural roots in the San Luis Valley, where he works for Idaho Potatoes in Center, Colo. Younger son Makile is a tattoo artist in Ft. Collins, and has inked many of Rivera's intricate tattoos. "He got it from me," Rivera says of Makile's artistic talent. "I have been drawing ever since I was a kid."

Lately, Rivera has gotten into "more of the Indian artwork," inspired by his great-grandmother's Ute heritage. "I used to do a lot of scratchboard work, and now I do a lot of wood-burning artwork – mostly for friends and family."Rivera also has a fascination with genealogy and spends winter evenings working on his family tree. Fall is devoted to bow hunting. Summers are filled with camping, hiking, fly fishing and softball. He and his wife have managed a softball team for over 20 years now. Rivera also has volunteered for the Ridgway Fire Protection District for 7 years. Rivera keeps in shape running half-marathons – a sport he picked up after he started working for the Town of Ridgway. This year, in honor of his 50th birthday, he is also planning to compete in the Imogene Pass Run for the second time. Running is tough, but he loves how it makes him feel. "Getting away from everything and being in your own thoughts – it's mind-relieving and it relaxes you," he said. "You're in competition with yourself, trying to achieve your own goals."

-Samantha Wright

Ridgway's First Female Marshal

Tammy Stroup



When Tammy Stroup became Ridgway Town Marshal in June 2017, she joined a whole team of women in top-tier positions at the Town of Ridgway. “You may hear that you got hired because you are a woman,” Town Manager Jen Coates told Stroup when she offered her the job. “I want you to know, you got hired for this position because you are qualified for it.” Coates may have added that Stroup is uniquely qualified – with her background as a victim’s advocate, homicide investigator with the Montrose County District Attorney’s office, and forensic interviewer on child sex assault cases. Stroup blends femininity with a straight-forward, no-nonsense disposition. She considers herself to be very down-to-earth in her community policing style. “My philosophy is that I want to make a difference,” she said. “I know how the justice system works, from arrest to court to detention. I know the probation aspect, and parole. I know how to just sit down and talk to people. Treating people with respect goes a long way toward deescalating a situation.”

An Unusual Path

Stroup followed an unusual path to become the Town of Ridgway’s first female marshal. She grew up in a sheep ranching family in Montrose. Her dream as a kid was to become a veterinarian. Toward that end, she studied biology at Mesa State (now Colorado Mesa University) and went on to attend vet tech school in Glenwood Springs. But eventually she realized that she had an even greater need to help people. The epiphany happened when she was a young mother living in Battlement Mesa. Her first husband, a cop, had responded to a domestic call next door, and the neighbor kids had come over to her place. “Their parents were fighting, and it was bad,” Stroup recalled. She stood by with the kids and watched as several law enforcement officers dragged the mother out of the house by the hair, while the father was treated with respect. “It was very appalling to me,” Stroup said. “I wanted to be the one to make a difference. The experience gave me that itch to do something different.” Not long after that incident, Stroup moved to Pueblo, and started working as a victim’s advocate in a felony division of district court. Through this sometimes heartbreaking work, she realized she wanted to learn more about the investigative aspect of law enforcement. When a death in the family brought her home to Montrose, she enrolled in the police academy in Delta, then landed an investigator position at the 7th Judicial District Attorney’s office. She worked her way up to become chief investigator, investigating “crimes against persons” (homicide and sexual assault cases). Through this work, she discovered an affinity for working with kids. So after 10 years at the DA’s office, she went to work as a forensic interviewer at the Dolphin House Child Advocacy Center in Montrose, while also working part-time for the Ouray Police Department and completing a field training program to get more policing experience under her belt. In early 2017, she was encouraged to apply for the town marshal vacancy in Ridgway that had opened up following former marshal David Scott’s retirement. The rest is history. Through it all, Stroup has raised two daughters from her first marriage – Kelsey and Hailey. She met her second husband, Billy Stroup, at a wool growers banquet in 2009. He also works in law enforcement as a sergeant with the Montrose Police Department. Together, they are raising their young son, Gage – “a big surprise!” – who attends Cottonwood Elementary School in Montrose. “Little Man is a gardener,” Stroup said affectionately. “He’s an interesting little soul.”

Making a Difference

It’s taken some time for the Ridgway Marshal’s Office to adapt to its new female leader. The deputies who were on board when she arrived opted to resign. But Stroup is very happy with the new team she’s gone on to assemble in their wake. “It’s been great,” she said. “We work really well together.” Which is a good thing, because “there is a lot more going on than people know.” Juvenile drug issues. Domestic violence and assault. Road rage. DUI’s related to both alcohol and marijuana. Theft. Embezzlement. Mental health calls. Summer transient issues. It’s a lot to handle, for Stroup and her small team of deputies in this seemingly sleepy, peaceful little town. One of Stroup’s top priorities when she came on board was to proactively develop a rapport between the marshal’s office and the community. On that score, she’s making steady progress. “It’s gotten to a state where people are reporting more incidents to our office,” she said. ““I love the people, the conversations, learning about who they are, being part of making a positive change. I feel blessed I am here and get to be part of making a difference.”

-Samantha Wright



Pam Kraft

A Town Clerk / Treasurer Who Knows How to Keep Her Cool

Pam Kraft has a lot more on her plate than most town clerks. Not only does she helm the business end of the Town of Ridgway – from its budget to its elections – she also coordinates the Ridgway Concert Series, the Love Your Valley Festival and "Townie Tuesday" movie nights in Hartwell Park, and serves on the boards of Public Art Ridgway Colorado and the Ridgway Creative District. "There is never a dull moment in this job," she smiles, acknowledging that her work can be all-consuming at times. "But I love it."

Kraft's serene, relaxed attitude can be traced to her upbringing in a beach community in southern California. But the mountains were always calling. She made her way to Mammoth Lakes, a ski resort in the eastern Sierras, in 1975. The town incorporated in 1983, and Kraft got hired as Town Clerk. "It was a great opportunity," she said. "I got to help the town organize and build from the ground up."

After 16 years in Mammoth Lakes, Kraft spent some time on the Big Island of Hawaii, then travelled throughout the western US looking for a town where she could put down roots. She stumbled across Ridgway in 1993. "When I came here, I was actually headed to Telluride, and then I saw Ridgway and I said, 'This is It,'" she said. "I knew. As soon as I saw it." Kraft had been the Town Clerk in Mammoth Lakes prior to becoming Ridgway's Town Clerk/Treasurer in 1996 – with only three employees at Town Hall.

Kraft got into the festival business in 1999, when she coordinated an annual Children's Harvest Festival to raise money for the Ridgway Library. In 2007, under Kraft's direction, the Town of Ridgway took over the festival, incorporating live music into the mix. Concert promoter Rob Miller of Pickin' Productions took note. He had recently started the Paonia Concert Series, which brought weekly outdoor concerts to Paonia throughout the month of August, and asked if the Town of Ridgway would like to tag onto the front end of that series for the month of July. The answer was an enthusiastic "Yes!" The inaugural Ridgway Concert Series got underway the next summer, with Kraft assuming the role of director. It was a huge hit, but then the Great Recession struck, and the town declined to fund the series for a second season. So Kraft started reaching out for sponsors and developed alcohol sales to help pay for the concerts. The whole community got behind the effort in a huge way, and the concert series was saved.

Today, it's the highlight of the Ridgway summer season, attracting huge, happy crowds to Ridgway's Hartwell Park for a magical evening of live music and dancing each Thursday in July. Kraft used to be right in the thick of it all, dancing and partying right in front of the stage. But as the Concert Series has grown in popularity, she's become way too busy making sure things are running smoothly behind the scenes to partake in all the revelry. Twenty years into her career as Ridgway Town Clerk, Kraft still can't imagine doing anything else – let alone retiring. After all, "pretty soon it will be time to start talking about next year's concert series," she points out. "And right now it's time to talk about the budget. After the budget, it's time for elections." And there's always the next town council meeting looming on the horizon. -Samantha Wright

Shay Coburn

A Woman with a Plan



As a girl growing up in southern California, Shay Coburn loved rearranging her room and drawing out plans. “I was paying attention to my built environment without knowing that was a thing,” she laughed. The seeds of her future career as an urban planner were sown as a teen, when developers tore down a quirky, cool little neighborhood shopping center that was within walking distance of her home and put in a big impersonal Kohl’s department store. Coburn remembers wondering “What just happened? Why didn’t anyone say that was a bad idea?” She still won’t shop at Kohl’s. And today, as Ridgway’s Town Planner, she is committed to making sure people here have a say in manifesting the vision they want for their community. “You can’t always get your way, but you can participate and be part of the conversation,” she said. “If you don’t agree with the way things are going, why are you not stepping up at a different level?”

Ridgway Beckons

Coburn discovered Ridgway several years ago when she was working with the Colorado Department of Local Affairs as coordinator for the Colorado Main Street Program. When she started with the program, she found herself in Ridgway a number of times for different check-in meetings and felt an immediate connection to the community. A few years down the road, the Town of Ridgway decided it was time to hire a planner. (The job had previously been folded into Town Manager Jen Coates’ position.) Coburn leaped at the chance to apply, got the job, and came on board in 2017. Her job description requires her to be versatile, zooming in on the minutia of building permits, land use permits and land use applications while also zooming out on the Town of Ridgway’s “big picture view” as she develops policy change proposals and spearheads a master plan update. All while considering the overriding question: “What is the community’s vision and how do we go about achieving it?”

Cali-Rado Girl

Coburn was born in Colorado Springs and grew up with her mom and sister in Rossmoor, near the town of Seal Beach in southern California. In the summers, she frequently visited her father, step-mom and step-siblings in Boulder, then Golden, Colo., and always felt a connection to the state. Coburn went to college at CU Boulder where she studied environmental design at the School of Architecture and Planning. After graduating in 2007, she took a year off, traveled a bit, and worked at a coffee shop in California before going to grad school at CU Denver. While pursuing her graduate degree, she interned with Clarion Associates, a well-known land use consulting firm. The internship evolved into a full-time job where she remained for four and a half years before quitting to travel around South America for nine months with her boyfriend (now husband), Andrew. Between travels, they volunteered for Habitat for Humanity in La Paz, Bolivia and worked for El Cajas National Park in Ecuador, writing their visitor use plan. Now that they live in Ridgway, Andrew is working remotely, doing consulting work in the planning field. They rent a small condo in town. “We love the convenience and simplicity of living in a small town,” Coburn said. “It’s easier to do stuff and enjoy the community.” In the summer, they love hiking, backpacking and mountain biking, and have gotten into fishing at Pa-co-chu-puk and other local rivers. And what does Coburn do during her infrequent moments of downtime? She wrinkles her forehead, trying to remember. “I did a puzzle, recently...” she recollects. “I guess I need a hobby.”

Go With the Wind

There is a joke about urban planners being people who want to save the world. Coburn thinks there is some truth to that. “We are always idealistic,” she said. “It’s a curse.” But in a town the size of Ridgway, it’s easy for Coburn to remain idealistic when she plays a such vital, nuts-and-bolts role in helping to shape the town’s future. She’s not quite sure yet whether she and Andrew will put down permanent roots in the community. “As much as I’m a planner, I have never been one to plan my life,” she admitted. “I go with the wind a little bit, trust the world and signs that come my way. I could see getting so involved with my work that it feels too overwhelming to live here, but I can also see staying here forever.” - Samantha Wright

Young & Restless
Lu Hauger



Lauren "Lu" Hauger has always been the new girl. Throughout her 24 years, she has lived in a total of 15 places, always dreaming of where she'll go next. “For a long time, my childhood dream was joining the Peace Corps, but some U.S. interventions abroad have had a harmful effect – countries become dependent on foreign aid and can't sustain themselves,” she explained. So instead, she decided to study political science in hopes of finding other ways to help others. Hauger arrived in Ridgway in 2016 via U.C. Denver's “Best and Brightest” program, which matches a select handful of graduate students with small, rural governmental jurisdictions throughout Colorado for a two-year internship in municipal management. Twice a month, Hauger travels to U.C. Denver's Center for New Directions in Politics and Public Policy for an intensive 16-hour weekend of Master's coursework classes with fellow New Directions graduate students from across the state.

She was born in rural Idaho, the eldest of four siblings, in the same town her dad grew up in. Her parents moved around a lot, granting their children an unusual amount of freedom while they were growing up. “Rather than giving us boundaries, they said 'Just don't betray our trust,'” she explained. The family bopped around the West, relocating every so often to a new state, a new town, a new school. Because of her gypsy upbringing, she has friends everywhere today. But it hasn't always been easy to be the new girl. She was bullied badly as a teenager when her family moved to rural northwestern Colorado about 10 years ago. After that, with her parents' blessing, she took a break from high school and lived in Germany with some family friends. By the time she returned to the U.S., her family had relocated yet again – this time to Montrose, where she finished up high school and began mentoring children about bullying by creating awareness campaigns in surrounding communities.

Hauger began her college education as a biology student at Colorado Mesa University, but her life took an unexpected turn in her sophomore year when she won a full-ride scholarship to attend the Colorado Capitol Conference in Washington, DC. This conference offers Colorado residents the opportunity to interact with the nation's leaders and provides key insights into how the U.S. government works. Hauger was one of only five students selected to attend that year. The experience changed her life. “I was really moved by the passion of everyone, and the unity of humans coming together to understand each other,” she said. “I fell in love with it – not the politics, but trying to tackle big issues together regardless of what our lives are like.” Upon returning to CMU, she changed her major to political science, then took a year off from college to reassess her direction while working on a glacial helicopter base in Juneau, Alaska. Eventually, she moved to Oregon to start school again, but due to family-related hardship, Hauger moved back to Colorado to be closer to her family. Hauger completed her undergraduate political science degree with honors distinction at the University of Colorado in Colorado Springs in May 2016. But her years as a biology major have given her unique insights into municipal management. “I feel like I am still studying biology,” she said. “It is just an extrapolated interaction between an organism and its environment. That's the cool thing about political science. It's getting to the root of human nature; how people think, why they think that way, and how to organize in the aftermath.”

In between grad school and her responsibilities at Town Hall, Hauger spends as much time as she can with her family in Montrose, plus her two pet rats and a cat she adopted as a kitten from the Delta Humane Society. She also loves to read, travel, paint acrylic abstracts and make jewelry. Last summer, she had a booth at the Ridgway Farmer's Market where she sold wire-wrapped crystals. While Hauger enjoys her work for the Town of Ridgway, she quickly realized that she is not cut out for the municipal management track. “I want a job that allows me to see more of the world, see different cultures and understand humanity on a basic level,” she explained. “I want to see more and understand how to fix the problems everyone everywhere has. Mostly I want to help people in a way that is tangible and real.” Hauger is not sure yet what form that will take. “I'm trying to figure that out. For now, I'm here,” she said. “and a big part of life is realizing you can make a difference every day on a small level if you choose to.”

-Samantha Wright