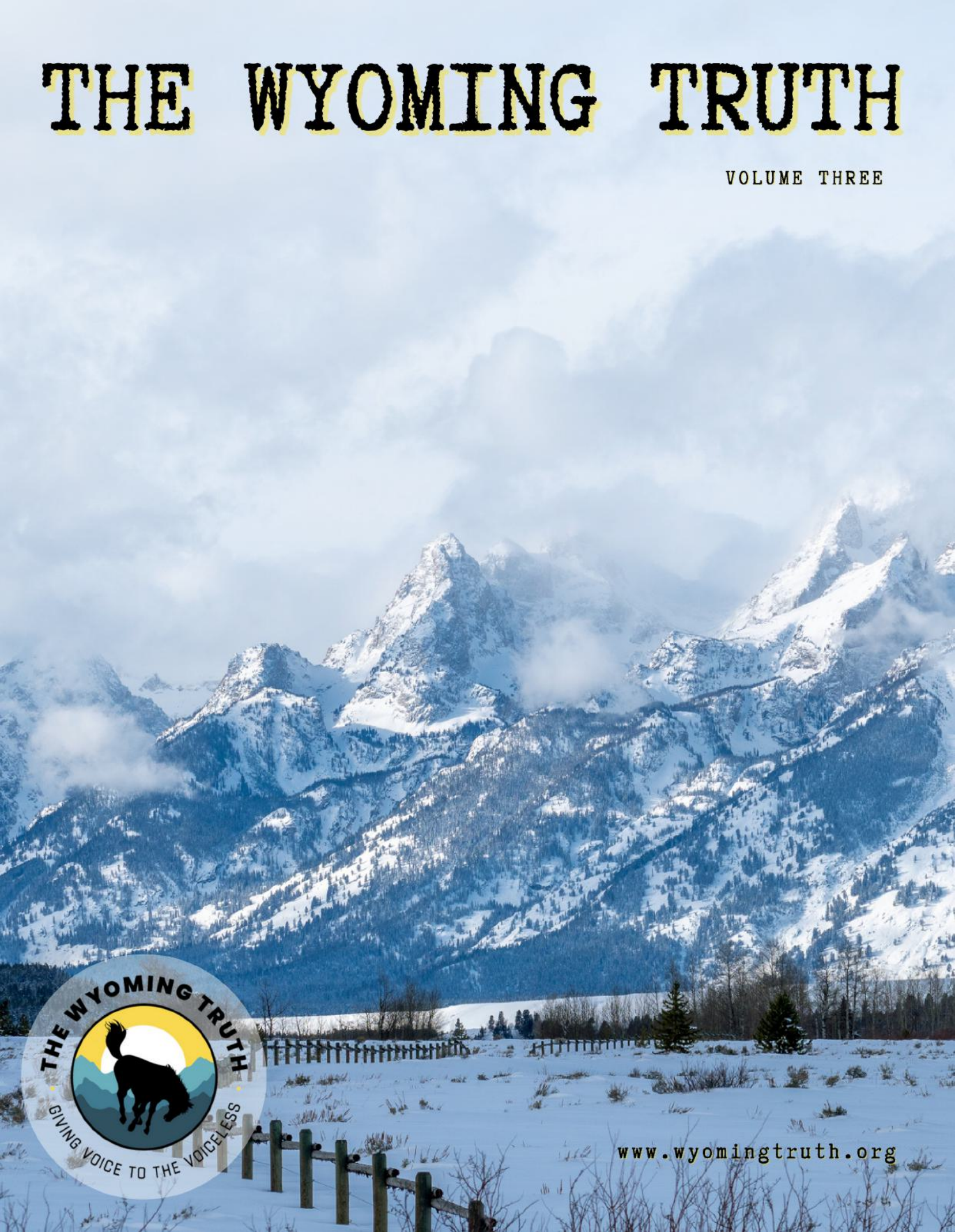


# THE WYOMING TRUTH

VOLUME THREE



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



ORDER NOW  
wylandoflavender.com

Made  
in  
Wyoming

# Natural Skin Products

Chemical, Preservative & Perfume Free



Handmade With  
Only Natural Ingredients

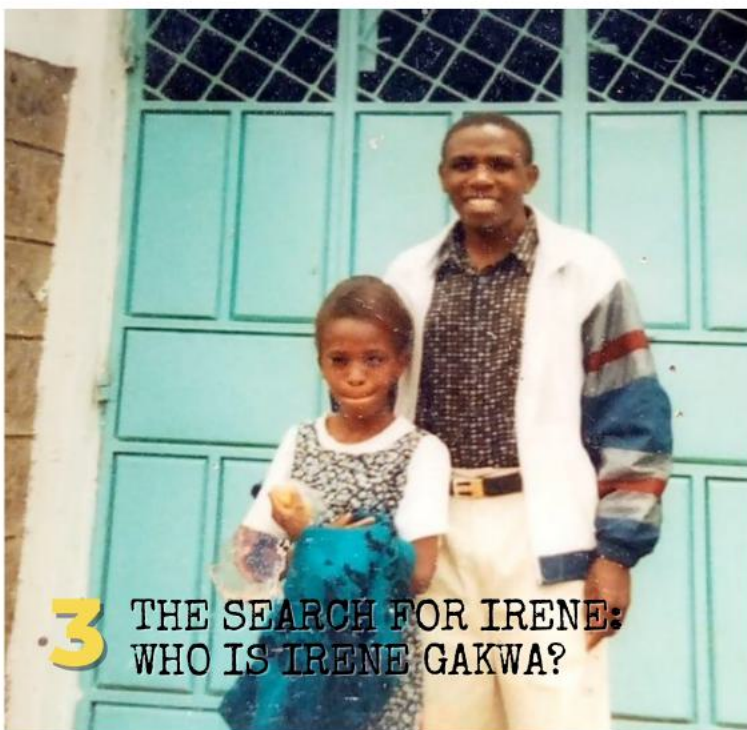
 Facebook.com/wylandoflavender

 wylandoflavender@gmail.com

 307.547.2315



# CONTENTS



**3** THE SEARCH FOR IRENE:  
WHO IS IRENE GAKWA?

## CRIMINAL JUSTICE

- 3 THE SEARCH FOR IRENE: WHO IS IRENE GAKWA? (PART 1)
- 7 THE SEARCH FOR IRENE: THE MYSTERIOUS LIFE OF NATHAN HIGHTMAN (PART 1)

## OTHER NEWS & FEATURES

- 11 WYOMING BRAIN DRAIN: MAJORITY OF UW STUDENTS LEAVE THE STATE AFTER GRADUATION STUDY SHOWS
- 15 UW BANS CHURCH ELDER PROMPTING FREE SPEECH OUTCRY
- 22 THE UNIQUE MYSTIQUE OF SOUTH FORK ICE
- 26 WOMEN YOU SHOULD KNOW IN WY: LARAMIE BOTANIST THRIVES IN WILDERNESS CLASSROOMS



**22**

THE UNIQUE MYSTIQUE  
OF SOUTH FORK ICE



**26**

WOMEN YOU SHOULD  
KNOW IN WYOMING

## POLITICS

- 19 WITH THREE NEW LAWMAKERS IN THEIR 20S, THE WY LEGISLATURE IS GETTING A YOUTH INFUSION

## 25 FEATURED PHOTOS

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

🌐 WWW.WYOMINGTRUTH.ORG



© 2023. The Wyoming Truth  
Daily news and features that matter  
to Wyomingites.

Free, fearless and for you. Anyone can  
run our stuff; just credit us.

Front cover photo by Sam Cook

# 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 Wyoming Truth is also a member of LION Publishers, a professional association for local independent news publishers in the U.S. and Canada.

## The Team

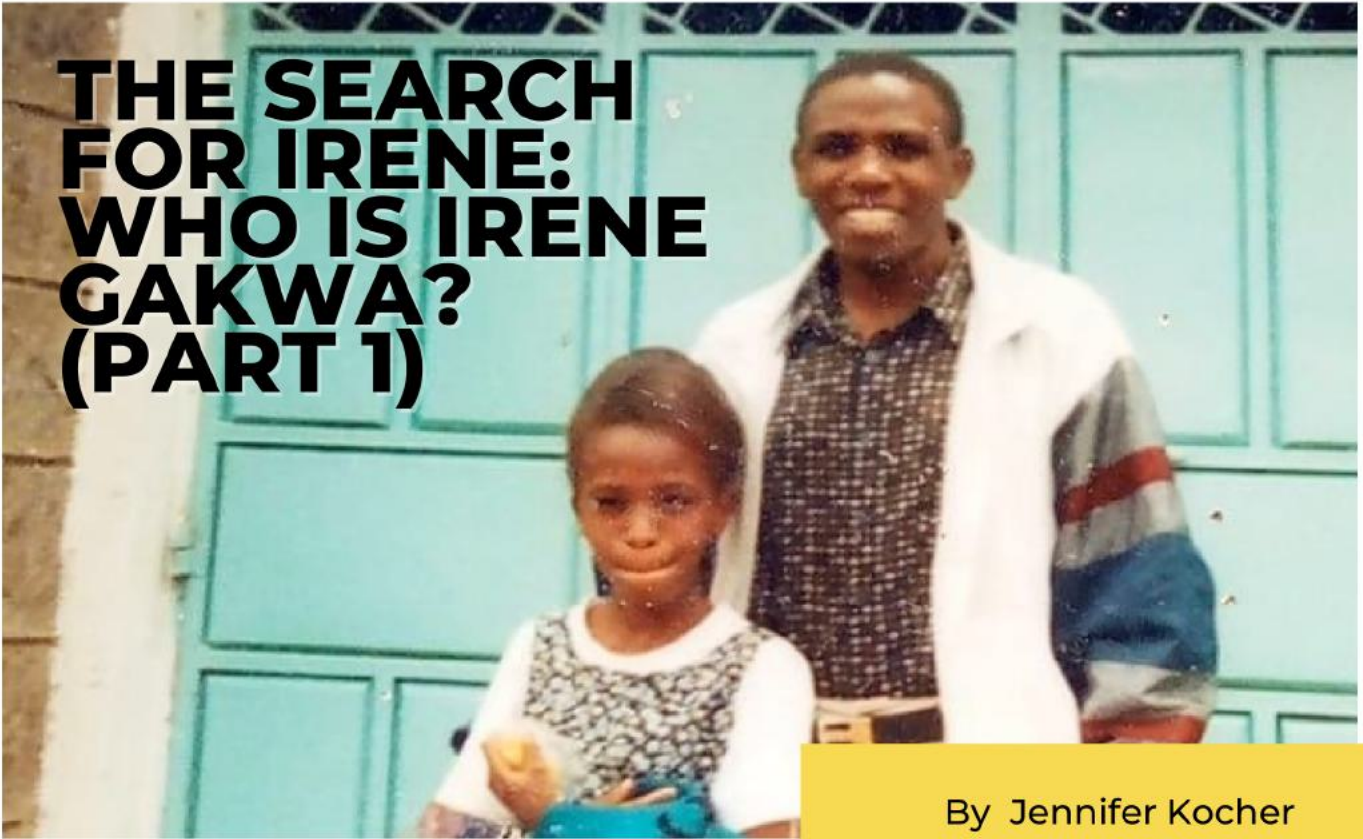
						
Alec Klein President	Tom Fleener General Counsel	Cynthia Hanson Editor	CJ Baker Contributing Writer			
						
Kaycee Clark-Mellott Web Editor & Writer	Kristi Eaton Contributing Writer	Ellen Fike Contributing Writer	Grace Foulk Contributing Broadcaster	Jacob Gardenswartz Washington, D.C., Correspondent	Amber Gibson Contributing Writer	
						
Samuel Gilbert Contributing Writer	Jennifer Kocher Contributing Writer	Mandy Ludtke Development & Marketing Manager	Sarah Scales Contributing Writer	Matt Stirn Contributing Photographer	Shen Wu Tan Contributing Writer	Melissa Thomasma Contributing Writer

## The Advisory Board

						
Rhonda Bear	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 SEARCH FOR IRENE: WHO IS IRENE GAKWA? (PART 1)



By Jennifer Kocher  
January 19, 2023

## Missing Kenyan's father describes kind-hearted daughter who loved cooking and helping people

Francis Kambo has his memories. His eyes grew wide, as he strolled across the golden grass on his three-acre property in the Rift Valley in Kenya where his daughter, Irene Gakwa, lived until she was 29.

"She was a Daddy's girl," Kambo said with a wan smile. "She wanted to be around me all the time."

It's been nearly a year since Kambo has spoken to his 33-year-old daughter. The two talked almost every day after she moved to Meridian, Idaho in 2019 to be close to her two older brothers. Their last conversation was a Whatsapp video call in late February, before Gakwa mysteriously disappeared from the Gillette home she shared with her

fiancé Nathan Hightman.

Gakwa had looked tired, Kambo recalled. She blamed it on work, and he suggested she drink some milk and take a warm bath. She really missed their native food, she told him, and craved the fresh fish and beef that made up her diet in Kenya. The two made plans for Gakwa to fly home for Christmas.

Unbeknownst to Kambo, Gakwa was in Wyoming with Hightman at the time of their last call. Gakwa had told her father she was in Texas, even though the couple had moved to Gillette in July 2021.

Hightman, 39, told police Gakwa left the couple's home one evening with her

belongings packed in two plastic bags. He said that she got into a dark-colored SUV and that he hasn't seen or heard from her since, according to court documents.

Hightman is considered by police to be a "person of interest" in Gakwa's disappearance. Last May, he was charged with five felonies related to financial and intellectual property crimes against her.

Hightman's trial for those alleged crimes has been postponed from February. As of Jan. 18, no court date has been set.

### Lingering questions

Kambo told the Wyoming Truth over a Facebook messenger call Tuesday that he does not care about Hightman's alleged five felonies. He just wants answers about what happened to his daughter.

Kambo's last video chat with Gakwa was on Feb. 24. After that, Kambo received a handful of short WhatsApp messages from her account in which she told him she'd recently moved to Texas. But she made excuses for why couldn't do a video call. The two communicated in a mixture of Swahili and English.

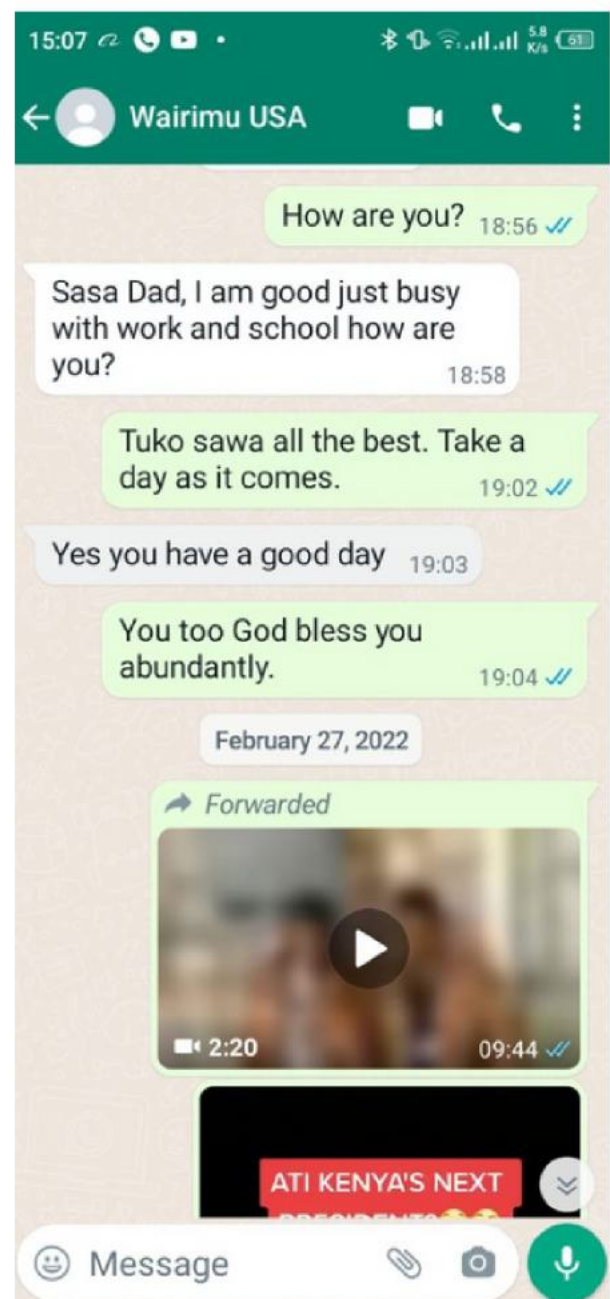
A message on Feb. 27 from Gakwa's account referenced her impending trip to Kenya and Gakwa's recent move to San Antonio, Texas. Her father asked if she needed help financially to which she replied, "No Dad I am well..."

Another message from her account on Feb. 28 said she couldn't do a video call, because she'd dropped her phone in water and the microphone was not working.

*Pictured right: After his last video call with his daughter Irene Gakwa on Feb. 24, Francis Kambo received a series of short messages from Gakwa's account referencing her recent move to Texas and referencing a new phone number. (Courtesy photos from Francis Kambo)*

The last message Kambo received from Gakwa was on March 9, in which she promised to text him from her new phone number. When the messages stopped, Kambo asked his sons to contact Gakwa.

A close friend of Gakwa's informed them that she was living in Wyoming with Hightman. The brothers drove to Gillette and filed a missing person report on March 20.





### Early life in Kenya

Kambo was against his daughter moving to the United States. She, too, was hesitant about the move, because her father had just retired and was experiencing some health problems. Gakwa wanted to stay to help take care of him. But her older brothers convinced their father that it was a good idea to let Gakwa go, so she could experience life on her own and attend nursing school, Kambo said.

The two had always been very close. Kambo worked as a mechanic for American Airlines and traveled around the world repairing planes. Gakwa hadn't liked her father being on the road. When he called from the airport to say he was on his way home, she would show up at the airport and wait for him at the gate. Once at home, she competed with her brothers for their dad's attention and wanted him to only sit next to her.

"That is the girl I am missing," Kambo said, smiling through his tears.

Kambo admitted that he spoiled his only daughter. Sometimes, that meant buying seven blouses when she originally asked for two.

Gakwa was equally generous with others, he said. As a girl, she often cooked and delivered meals at the children's home for orphans. On Christmas, she insisted on taking gifts to them. If a family couldn't afford to feed their children, Gakwa would ask her father to help.

"She has such a big heart," he said, "and was always caring for others."

Even the family's chickens, Kambo said with a laugh. They'd accidentally killed a handful

because they'd fed them the wrong food. When Gakwa, then age 4, saw the dead birds, she assumed they were just sleeping and immediately covered them with a blanket. When the family woke up, Gakwa suggested to her father that they bring the chickens some tea. He was heartbroken to have to tell her the truth.

Gakwa also wasn't in a hurry and reveled in her surroundings, Kambo said. She insisted that he drive at half the speed limit, so she could enjoy the scenes of daily life, such as women carrying firewood on their backs or farmers in the field manually planting one or two beans at a time. She also enjoyed pointing out the wild hyenas, elephants, rhinos and sometimes lions grazing near the roads.

Gakwa, along with her two brothers, attended an elite boarding school for high school, located about 120 miles from their home just outside Nairobi.

"I tried to give my children the best," he said. "I didn't want my kids to have trouble."

Gakwa thrived in school, he said. After graduation, she worked at the front office at Nairobi Serena Hotel. She told her father she took the job to make friends. But she wasn't happy there, so she set into motion her plan to attend nursing school in the United States.

### Story doesn't add up

Even after she left home, Gakwa remained closed with Kambo. If he didn't call her every day, Gakwa would tease him about forgetting about his only daughter. Sometimes, they talked twice a day. And she'd sometimes call him in the middle of the night in Kenya, because she knew he'd

answer the phone.

The fact that she kept Hightman a secret from him and her mother confounds Kambo.

“It was 180 degrees of what I knew of Irene,” he said, describing a girl who brought all of her friends – and sometimes strangers – home to meet the family.

Kambo thinks Gakwa knew that he wouldn't have approved of Hightman, because he wouldn't have made the cut in his eyes. He also doesn't understand the slow-moving wheels of the American justice system, while his daughter remains missing.

Kambo tries not to succumb to the dark thoughts about what might have happened to Gakwa. Sometimes, he worries that she might be lost and in need of his help.

“One thing I know,” Kambo said, “is that any evil that is done in this world will be repaid once someone is buried. The truth will come out.”

Stay tuned for part two coming to you soon.

## **SMALLTOWNCONSULT.COM**



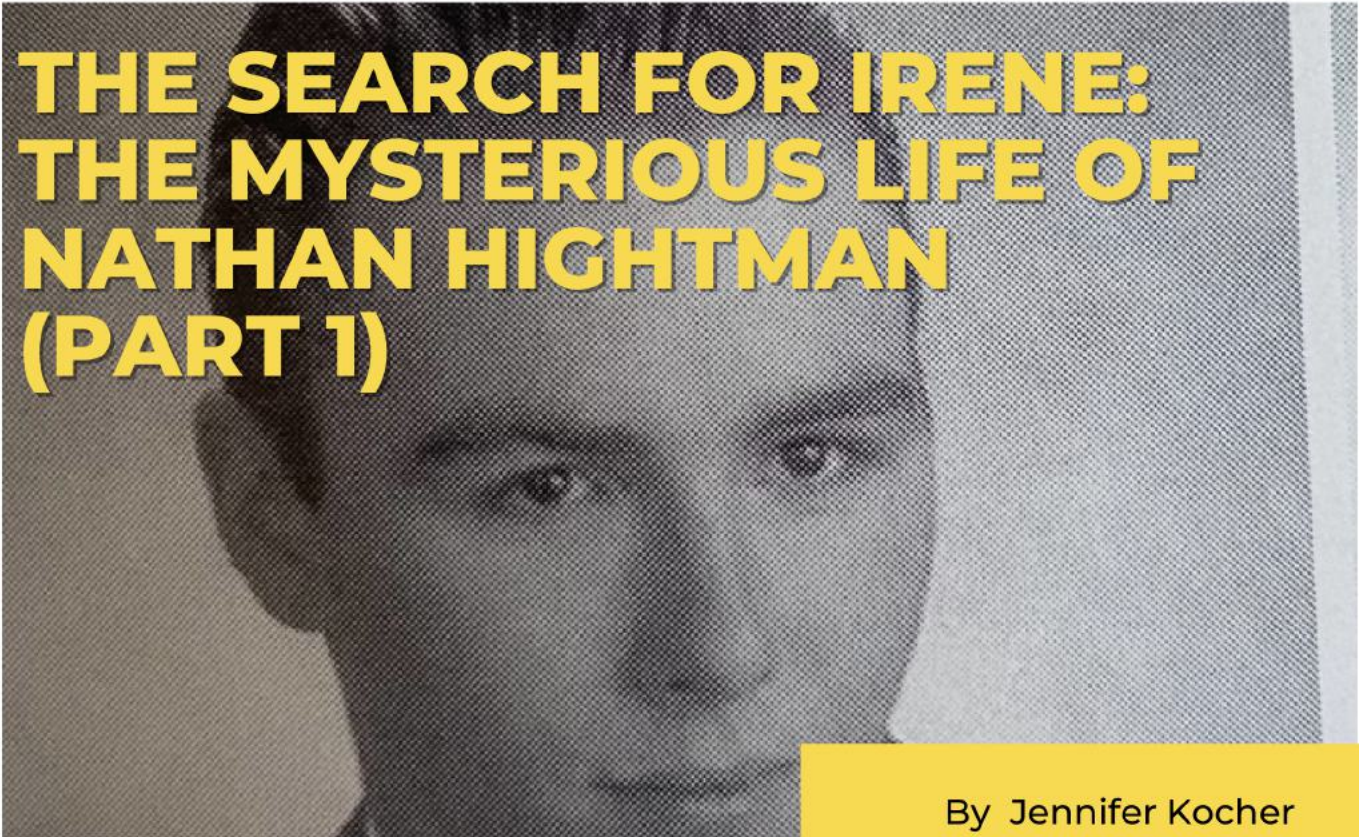
**SMALL TOWN**  
CONSULTING, LLC

- 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



# THE SEARCH FOR IRENE: THE MYSTERIOUS LIFE OF NATHAN HIGHTMAN (PART 1)



By Jennifer Kocher  
December 9, 2022

**Hightman remains “person of interest”  
in Kenyan’s disappearance**

GILLETTE, Wyo.—Who is Nathan J. Hightman?

It’s a question that many people are asking—from Gillette to Nairobi. For the past 10 months, Hightman’s name has been splashed across headlines and his image broadcast on network news as the fiancé of Irene Gakwa, 33, the Kenyan nursing student who vanished last winter.

Hightman’s estranged stepsister described her older brother as a smart, tech-savvy homebody who spent his childhood tethered to his computer.

A former coworker and friend, who said she casually dated Hightman for a time, recalled him as a man who created a rich fantasy life.

His unearthed 2019 resume chronicled the life of a California native who worked as a customer service representative and former co-owner of a computer design company.

And to Gillette police, Hightman, 39, is a “person of interest” in Gakwa’s mysterious disappearance.

Gakwa was last seen in a video chat with her parents in late February and was reported missing by her brothers, Chris Gakwa and Kennedy Wainaina, on March 20.

Hightman told police that Irene Gakwa left on her own accord at about the time she last spoke with her parents. He said that she returned from dinner one evening and announced that she was leaving; that she



“then packed her belongings in two plastic bags, entered a dark-colored SUV and left the area. He said he hasn’t seen or heard from her since.

In May, Hightman was charged with five felonies related to financial and intellectual property crimes against Gakwa. The charges include three felonies involving transferring over \$3,600 from Gakwa’s bank account, maxing out her credit card, changing her banking password and deleting an email account.

Police continue to investigate Gakwa’s disappearance. On Oct. 13, police and the FBI conducted a nearly eight-hour search of Hightman’s house. Several boxes of evidence were seized and sent to the FBI lab for processing, but according to Brent Wasson, Gillette deputy chief of police, there are no new updates to report.

Much has been written about Hightman’s felony charges and the many searches for Gakwa conducted by a dedicated group of local Gillette-area volunteers. But little has been reported about Hightman himself. Police said he is not cooperating with their investigation, and Hightman has yet to participate in any of the searches for Gakwa.

Hightman did not respond to the Wyoming Truth’s email request to be interviewed for the story. His attorney, Dallas Lamb with the Campbell County Public Defender’s Office, likewise did not respond to a request for an interview.

Hightman remains out on a \$10,000 cash bail. He continues to reside in the couple’s home in northern Campbell County as he

*Pictured right: Nathan Hightman (top row, third from the left) appears in a group photo with classmates at a California high school. (Courtesy photo from Las Plumas High School yearbook)*

awaits his pretrial date in early January after being granted a second continuance.

### Computer whiz

Hightman is rarely seen in public. One neighbor reported that groceries and food are frequently delivered to his house.

That Hightman has been reclusive isn’t only due to the notoriety brought by his fiancé’s disappearance. His propensity to stay at home dates back to childhood, according to his 36-year-old stepsister, Heather Mayo, a stay-at-home mom who lives in Chico in the northern Sacramento valley of California. The two grew up together in Oroville, about 30 miles away, after Mayo’s mother, Becky, married Hightman’s father, Richard, when she was eight. Becky and Richard did not respond to requests for an interview.

Also residing with them were Richard’s daughters and Hightman’s younger half-sisters, Nacole and Crystal, who moved out to live with their mother in 1999 when Mayo was 13.





Hightman's two younger half-brothers, Alex and David "Max" Kircher, lived with Hightman's mother, Evelyn Brenner, in a small town nearby, Thermalito.

As a child and teenager, Mayo said that Hightman spent most of his time playing on his computer in his room, while the other neighborhood kids were outside shooting hoops and playing other sports. "I do remember that he never liked to go outside to play, but our parents forced it," she said to the Wyoming Truth via Facebook messenger.

Mayo also described Hightman as being highly intelligent. The two attended Las Plumas High School where he graduated in 2002. She said when Hightman told her that he could access information about her then-boyfriend and his parents on his computer, she didn't believe him.

"But the next day, he showed me their information," she said, without specifying what Hightman had uncovered.

Linda Draper, an English and journalism teacher at Las Plumas High School, taught Hightman journalism for one year. She recalled that he was "an average student" in her class, as well as an incident with classroom equipment.

"Students were allowed to check out digital cameras to get pics for stories, and we only had a few we bought with ad sales money," Draper said. "[Nathan] had checked one out, and then it turned up missing. When questioned, he swore he knew nothing about it so I let it go."

Mayo said she and Hightman had an "average brother and sister relationship." The two bickered as teenagers, like many

siblings do, but Mayo said, "We loved each other. ... He was my big brother."

Still, Mayo and Hightman haven't spoken since about 2002, when he left home at age 18 while their parents were at work, she said. He moved in briefly with his mother before getting an apartment with his then-girlfriend.

According to Mayo, Hightman had a falling out with her mother after he reportedly took some "things" when he moved, including a chair. Becky, Mayo's mother, paid for the belongings with money from a savings account she shared with her stepson.

Mayo said Hightman is estranged from his family, noting that he hasn't attended any family functions or stayed in contact with his father or stepmother since leaving home.

"He wanted to start his own life," she said.

Stay tuned for part two coming to you soon.

# 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.



Featuring the best and brightest of Wyoming.



A Wyoming photographer explores the beyond.

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.

 **60-SECOND WYOMING**  
HEADLINES FROM WYOMING'S LEADING NEWS OUTLETS

 **WEEK IN REVIEW**  
NEW EVERY FRIDAY





**MAJORITY OF UNIVERSITY OF WYOMING STUDENTS LEAVE THE STATE AFTER GRADUATION, STUDY SHOWS**

By Shen Wu Tan  
November 17, 2022

**Thousands flee the Cowboy State for opportunities elsewhere**

As a college student in Wyoming, Riley Talamantes pictured herself living in the Cowboy State after completing her studies because of the community she built and the sense of self she developed while living in Laramie. Yet, in the end, she left Wyoming for work opportunities in the Pacific Northwest.

Talamantes, 24, graduated from the University of Wyoming with degrees in political science and gender and women studies last December. Eight months later, she was living in Bend, Oregon—a high-desert town known for its abundant outdoor recreational activities—and working as a filing clerk at a law firm.

Talamantes' motivation was simple: In Wyoming, she struggled to find a job

outside of government or UW that paid well and provided benefits, such as healthcare.

“If you wanted to say, work at nonprofits or work at a law firm and utilize your degree, there just weren't really a lot of outside opportunities that paid well for me to consider and do that,” Talamantes said. “[But] when I moved out to Oregon, I wasn't really worried about [finding a job], because there were a lot of opportunities available.”

Talamantes isn't alone in seeking a better life beyond Wyoming's borders. Every year, hundreds of former UW students flee the state, contributing to a phenomenon dubbed “brain drain” that economists say could harm the health of the state's workforce.

Brain drain is the emigration of educated or professional people from one area or economic sector to another, often for better living conditions or pay.

According to a 2020 survey conducted by McKinsey & Co. and shared with the Wyoming Truth, the majority of UW graduates—about 66%—relocated after earning their degrees.

Of the other western states, Colorado was the most popular choice for UW graduates, with 19% ending up there. Five percent headed to California, while 2% moved to each of these six states: Arizona, Washington, Utah, Montana, Oregon and Nebraska. One percent migrated to Idaho, and around 1% moved to Nevada. What do most of these states have in common? Major metropolitan areas with larger populations, professional sports teams and a more vibrant cultural scene than what's found in towns across Wyoming.

The data also illustrates that 5% of UW graduates relocated to Texas, while 1.5% settled in Florida. Around 1% of UW graduates landed in each of the seven states: Illinois, Minnesota, South Dakota, New York, North Carolina, Virginia and Missouri.

"It's the chicken and egg question: to attract new companies and diversify our economy, we need these young, educated individuals to remain in the state and be ready to step into jobs in these new industries," said Robin Sessions Cooley, the director of the Wyoming Department of Workforce Services.

"But we need these new industries in order to keep these young, educated individuals in the state... As Baby Boomers continue to

retire, Wyoming needs younger workers to fill those positions in order to have a healthy labor force. Otherwise, it could become increasingly difficult for employers to find the people they need for the jobs they are trying to hire."

To provide more perspective, 66.6% of current UW students are in-state residents and 33.4% are from out of state, said Chad Baldwin, UW's associate vice president of institutional communications.

Michael Pearlman, Gov. Mark Gordon's spokesperson, told the Wyoming Truth that many graduates leave the state because of employment opportunities in specific industries.

"Governor Gordon recognizes the importance of building and maintaining a quality workforce that can serve the needs of the state," Pearlman said in a statement. "The challenges of diversifying the state's economy and retaining young workers are longtime issues that present unique challenges for a frontier state like Wyoming."

### The impacts of brain drain

So, how does Wyoming's economy play a role in brain drain?

Wenlin Liu, chief economist for Wyoming's Economic Analysis Division, described the state as "one of the least diversified economies in the country." The proportion of mining industry jobs is the highest in the United States, he added, even surpassing North Dakota, Alaska and West Virginia. These jobs also do not require a college degree.

The segment of Wyoming residents 25 years and older who hold a bachelor's degree was about 28% in 2020, while the proportion with





Riley Talamantes, a 2021 University of Wyoming graduate, declined an offer to work at UW and instead moved to Bend, Ore., to take a job as a filing clerk. (Courtesy photo from Riley Talamantes)

a high school diploma was around 94%, U.S. Census Bureau data illustrates.

The migration of folks out of Wyoming leads to a reduced labor force supply, Liu explained, and the longer-term effects of brain drain could be slow growth in population due to a faster-aging population and lower birth rate.

People 65 years and older comprise about 18% of Wyoming's population as of 2020, according to census data. Individuals under the age of 18 make up around 23%, and folks younger than five years old represent 6% of the population.

"Brain drain also weakens the local demand of goods and services, which in turn, would negatively affect local economic activities," Liu said.

The phenomenon is not limited to Wyoming. Other rural states with small populations, such as West Virginia, Maine,

Vermont and New Hampshire, also feel its impact. "In simple words, these states do not provide versatile professional-related employment opportunities and have limited choice in leisure and entertainment services," Liu said.

And the U.S. is not alone in grappling with brain drain. In Hong Kong, officials are offering two-year visas to individuals who earn over \$318,000 and to graduates from the world's top 100 universities who have at least three years of work experience, Reuters reported in October. Those from overseas who become permanent residents of Hong Kong also would be awarded stamp duty refunds for their first home purchase.

#### A call for a diversity of resources

Many Wyomingites who have left the state cited the lack of economic diversity as a major contributing factor. It certainly played a role in Wyoming native Jaxon Porterfield's decision to move out of Wyoming.

As a high school freshman, Porterfield started counting the days until their exodus. It took eight years, but Porterfield finally bolted in 2021, armed with degrees in political science and women's studies from UW—and eager for more learning, work and cultural opportunities.

Porterfield, who identifies as nonbinary, intended to major in chemical engineering at UW; it seemed like the natural path given the state's emphasis on science and engineering. But they hated chemical engineering and switched majors.

"I realized that a lot of my choice to pursue a chemical engineering degree was based on this foundation of Wyoming pushing me

into thinking that I needed to do math and science work...,” said Porterfield, now pursuing a master’s degree in communications at Missouri State University. “And then I was like, ‘No, this is awful. I don’t want to do this.’”

“I think that more resources need to be put into creative arts, creative pursuits,” Porterfield continued. “It needs to be balanced with the emphasis that we’re putting on engineering and those applied science degrees.”

Diversifying the economy and resources in Wyoming, as Porterfield suggested, could be a possible solution to brain drain.

Economic diversity is commonly seen as a way to achieve economic stability. But research is mixed as to whether it’s better for a state or local economy to become more diversified or to remain specialized in sectors where it has or can obtain a comparative advantage, Liu noted.

Exactly what is Wyoming’s comparative advantage, in Liu’s opinion? Fossil fuel energy extraction and natural resources, whether that’s outdoor recreation, hunting or renewable energy resources such as wind and solar power.

“Wyoming will attract and/or retain a population with strong affection for open space, clean air, outdoor activities, and perhaps the most important, the low tax burden for residents,” Liu told the Wyoming Truth. “After all, economic diversification is a long-term process, and it will take decades of time before seeing a difference.”

Yet, it’s murky as to whether Wyoming will be able to reverse the brain drain trend and its effects over time.

### Connections to the Cowboy State

While many no longer call Wyoming their home, a part of the Mountain West state remains with them. Porterfield still has family in Wyoming, so they will maintain a connection to the Cowboy State even though they cannot imagine living there again.

“I think a lot of it is just opportunity-based,” Porterfield said, regarding their relocation. “For me, in particular . . . to do the work I want to do, which is centered around harm reduction, how we talk about drugs in our communities and all that kind of stuff, I needed to be somewhere where that work was more established...”

Talamantes has fond memories of her years in Laramie, but she described the state as “backwards” and “lost in time,” partially due to lack of investments in businesses and infrastructure, such as public transportation.

Four months after settling in Oregon, Talamantes is looking ahead—not back. She enjoys living in a more demographically diverse state that she sees as socially progressive. And she appreciates the easy access to a ski resort, lava caves and national parks from her new home in Bend.

“I don’t regret my decision,” Talamantes said. “I think it was the right move for me.”



# UW BANS CHURCH ELDER, PROMPTING FREE SPEECH OUTCRY



By Ellen Fike  
January 17, 2023

## Laramie man's campus demonstration specifically targeted transgender student

The University of Wyoming's move to ban a Laramie church elder from its student union last month has sparked a First Amendment debate on campus and across the state.

Kevin Goldberg, a First Amendment specialist with the Freedom Forum Institute in Washington, D.C., said the elder's rights have been violated, and some conservative Wyoming legislators agree.

But some LGBTQ students at UW believe administrators should be more concerned for their welfare and question whether the campus will be safe and welcoming for their community when classes resume Tuesday.

The controversy began on Dec. 2, when Todd Schmidt, an elder with the Laramie

Faith Community Church, displayed a sign on a table at the campus' student union that said "God created man and woman and [student's name] is a man."

The student referenced is a transgender female and recent inductee into the Kappa Kappa Gamma sorority, a move that has caused controversy among more conservative legislators in the state, who have referred to the student as "a man" and questioned the safety of this move.

Schmidt's sign quickly caused a stir, prompting arguments between Schmidt and students passing through the Wyoming Union. Ultimately, university officials asked him to remove the individual's name, as many students considered the move to be



*First-year music performance major Sarah Gonda sports a face painted with the colors of the LGBTQ flag while attending a protest against discrimination last month at the University of Wyoming. (Wyoming Truth photo by Kaycee Clark)*

transphobic. Schmidt complied but was not removed from the campus.

Days later, 70 students participated in a silent demonstration in support of the LGBTQ+ community and to protest university policies that kept Schmidt from seeing harsher consequences.

UW freshman Keely Kidd, who uses they/them pronouns, was the organizer of the protest.

“The protest wasn’t necessarily against Todd,” Kidd, a first-year student, told the Wyoming Truth. “It was also against the university’s response and how unsafe queer students have felt on campus before and after the incident in the union.”

However, Schmidt was later suspended from having table privileges in the student union for one year. In a statement, UW President Ed Seidel said Schmidt violated the university’s policy prohibiting discrimination and harassment.

“While freedom of expression is cherished on this campus and across this nation, a line was crossed when a student was harassed by name,” Seidel said. “This is something we will not tolerate on this campus, and this action speaks to that key principle to which we adhere at UW. We do not tolerate harassment of any student or any university community member.”

When reached for further comment, UW spokesman Chad Baldwin pointed back to Seidel’s original statement.

First Amendment violation?

Goldberg, the First Amendment expert, said that while he does not agree with Schmidt’s actions, UW violated his First Amendment rights by suspending him from the student union.

“The university has clearly engaged in viewpoint discrimination, no matter how you define the situation,” Goldberg told the Wyoming Truth. “It seems to be that they are picking sides of the discussion, which is the worst thing the university could do.”

Goldberg explained that since the university has designated public forums on campus, Schmidt is allowed to have a table in that space and express his opinions, whether students agree with them or not.

While calling the transgender student by their birth name instead of their preferred name might be considered socially unacceptable, it is not hate speech or fighting words, both of which would be restricted under the First Amendment, Goldberg said.

“I’m extremely sympathetic to this individual that the elder is talking about,”



Goldberg said. “But as a First Amendment specialist, the elder had the right to speak. The First Amendment protects our right to be obnoxious.”

If Schmidt were to move forward with a lawsuit, Goldberg believes Schmidt could have a solid case against the university.

Goldberg said Schmidt’s right to engage in free speech has been violated due to the ban. But, he noted that arguably, Schmidt’s right to peaceably assemble and exercise his religion might have also been violated.

Neither Schmidt nor the transgender student responded to requests for comment.

### Wyoming legislators respond

Meanwhile, 25 Wyoming Republican legislators penned a letter to UW officials regarding the incident with Schmidt, calling on administrators to “condemn” the transgender student’s induction into the sorority and to reverse the ban against Schmidt.

“Open dialogue and bold pursuit of reality is the proper environment for higher education, not safe spaces,” the legislators wrote. “The recitation of a 3,000-year-old writing is hardly shocking and is not hate speech.”

The group of legislators who signed the letter included Secretary of State Chuck Gray, Sen. Lynn Hutchings (R-Cheyenne), Sen. Cheri Steinmetz (R-Lingle) and Rep. John Bear (R-Gillette), to name a few. Rep. Chip Neiman (R-Hulett) penned a separate letter in support of his fellow lawmakers.

In an interview with the Wyoming Truth,

Bear called Schmidt’s ban “egregious.” He believes UW officials banned Schmidt due to an outcry from the student newspaper The Branding Iron.

“The first thing I’d like to see is that [UW officials] reverse the decision and allow the elder to continue the 20 years he’s had a table [on campus],” Bear said. “If they don’t, then I would support an effort to reduce funding to the university until they get the picture.”

University officials stood firm in their decision to ban Schmidt.

Bear also expressed concerns about the university determining what a “protected class” (transgender people) is when the class is not already in university statute.

### Moving forward

Back at UW, Kidd said they toured many colleges before choosing UW, in part because of the prominence of its Rainbow Resource Center and Multicultural Affairs Office.



*Around 75 students gathered in the Simpson Plaza outside the Wyoming Union in a silent protest against LGBTQ harassment last month. (Wyoming Truth photo by Kaycee Clark)*



"It wasn't like that at the other schools I was considering," Kidd said. "But now that this [Schmidt incident] has happened, will students even feel comfortable associating themselves in these areas? Will it feel like being in those spaces, which are supposed to be safe spaces, might be putting targets on our backs?"

Kidd said the Schmidt incident reflects badly both on the university and Laramie, pointing out that Schmidt is not banned from the entire campus, just the student union.

"He's [still] allowed to preach his rhetoric on campus, which I think is even more dangerous," they said. "In planning the protest, I had people talking about how

queer students were warned whenever he was in the union so he could be avoided. Now that he is not allowed in the union, he can be anywhere at any time."

Kidd said university officials should look after its students first, rather than one person who is not affiliated with the school.

"I think that free speech comes with consequences," they said. "He chose to target a student and harass them. The University did the right thing taking the stand against him to protect its students, but it's not enough."

**TURQUOISE**



# CUSTOM LEATHER PRODUCTS

## CONTACT

*Hailey Hampton*

307-630-7016

Visit us on Facebook





# WITH THREE NEW LAWMAKERS IN THEIR 20S, THE WYOMING LEGISLATURE IS GETTING A YOUTH INFUSION (PART 1)



By CJ Baker  
December 29, 2022

## Incoming representatives hope to inspire other young people to get involved

It took only about two minutes for Dalton Banks' age to be used against him at a forum for legislative candidates.

"I would ask a very simple question," said fellow state House of Representatives contender Tim Beck, as he opened with something of a broadside on Banks. "At the age of 24, 25, how much experience does a person really have at that age — just getting married, having not made really tough life decisions yet?"

Speaking a month ahead of August's Republican primary, the 61-year-old Beck contrasted his "real" experience with Banks' "exposure."

But Banks, a public works operator for the Town of Cowley, didn't miss a beat.

Although the audience at the Cody library was supposed to remain silent, Banks drew some cheers when he noted he's actually 27 — and he attributed some of today's problems to the actions of older generations.

"We've got to stand up and say, 'Look, you guys have started [us in] the wrong direction,'" Banks said. "And now I'm just married, and these things are going to affect my family, my future children. And nobody has a bigger stake in it than I do."

Weeks later, voters endorsed Banks' new direction, selecting him over three other Republicans. He finished nearly 300 votes and over 10 percentage points ahead of Beck, the runner-up, and he then ran unopposed in the general election.



Although his relatively young age proved to be a hurdle on the campaign trail, Dalton Banks ultimately won over voters in northwest Wyoming to be elected to the state House of Representatives. He'll take office in January. (Courtesy photo from Dalton Banks)

That moment in Cody was the only time an opponent openly took a shot at Banks' age, he said, but it came up frequently with voters on the campaign trail.

"That was probably my biggest hurdle that I had to get over," Banks said in an interview with the Wyoming Truth.

He recalled people agreeing with his platform, then questioning his youth. But conversation by conversation, Banks won them over.

Banks wasn't the only young candidate to find success this year, either. When Banks is sworn into the Wyoming Legislature next month, two other 20-somethings will be alongside him: 21-year-old Rep. J.T. Larson (R-Rock Springs) and 25-year-old Rep. Daniel Singh (R-Cheyenne).

The new arrivals in the 67th Legislature will reportedly help lower Wyoming lawmakers'

average age from 57 1/2 to roughly 54. Incumbent Rep. Ocean Andrew (R-Laramie), who is 28, will abruptly go from being the youngest member of the House to the fourth-youngest. In the upper chamber, where senators must be at least 25 instead of 21, Brian Boner (R-Douglas) remains the youngest member at 38.

"Young people are starting to realize that the only way to see the future they want is to become involved in the community across the board," Larson said. A business agent for the Rock Springs Chamber of Commerce, he defeated a Democratic incumbent in the general election to become one of the youngest lawmakers in Wyoming history, if not the youngest outright.

It was a stinging loss for Wyoming Democrats, with longtime party member Mike Martin of Rock Springs recently dismissing Larson as "a 21-year-old who does not even have an associate's degree." However, that appears to have been a minority view: Larson – who actually holds an associate's degree in business management and is wrapping up a bachelor's degree in accounting – said none of the voters he encountered raised concerns about his age. And he won over 60% of the vote.

For his part, incoming Speaker of the House Albert Sommers (R-Pinedale) sees the influx of young lawmakers as a positive development for the Legislature.

"I think it's good to have people that represent all sectors of society, so certainly age is a part of that," said Sommers, who is 63. "It shouldn't just be all old guys like me."



“You have to fight for it”

Getting more young people involved in politics has long been an elusive goal for the state. Voter data shows that Wyomingites between the ages of 18 and 29 have historically been the least likely to cast a ballot. In the 2016 general election, for example, only a little over a third of Wyoming’s 18- to 24-year-olds voted, as compared to over two-thirds of residents in their 70s.

Boosting turnout among young people has been an aim of the Wyoming Secretary of State’s Office in past years, though those efforts have recently been eclipsed by a focus on election integrity. Youth turnout has fallen far enough down the priority list that the office told the Wyoming Truth it doesn’t have any voter demographic data on-hand for the past three election cycles.

Larson, Banks and Singh all hope their wins encourage others from their generation to participate in the political process — not just by voting, but by running for office.

“We need perspective from everybody,” said Singh, who works as a shift leader at Starbucks. “And if young people don’t get involved, then no one’s going to speak up for us.”

Singh said many in his generation feel disenfranchised by the political process and mistakenly think they can’t make a difference.

“They feel like ... their representatives are alien, they cannot contact them, they don’t understand them. They don’t feel adequately represented,” he said.

Singh thinks it’s important for young people to get involved with party politics, noting the big decisions made in Wyoming’s primary

elections. He won a three-way Republican race in August, then went unopposed in November’s general election. Yet it’s rare to spot young adults at Republican Party events, he said.

“When speakers come in, and they mention Generation Z, all the heads turn to me and the other guy that happens to be the same age,” Singh said, describing young people’s participation in the party as “abysmal.”

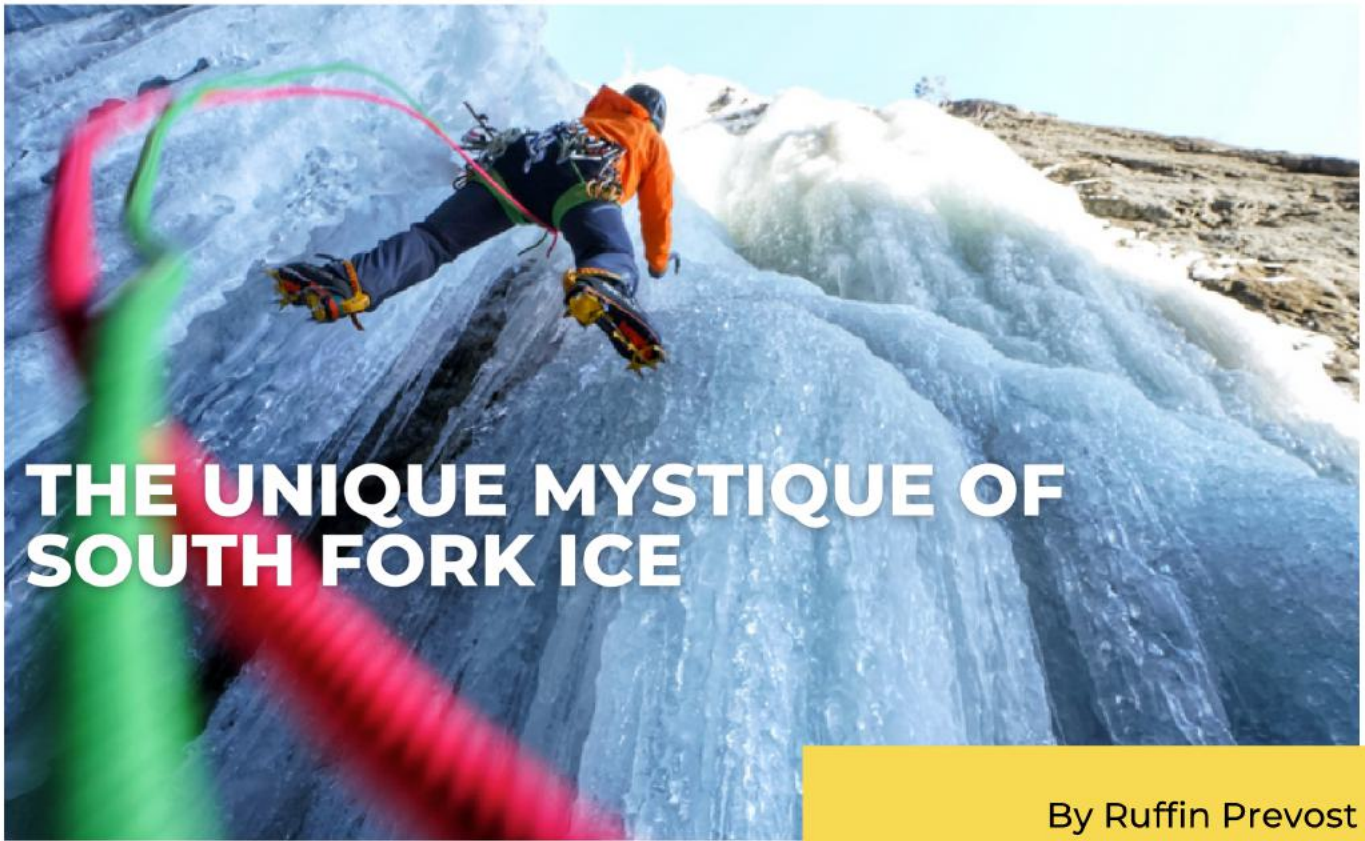
Banks, who made an unsuccessful run for Big Horn County Commission in 2018, tried starting a young Republicans group in his area, but it didn’t take off.

“I couldn’t get people involved,” he said.

Singh said many people his age “are just depressed” and feel alone. Multiple studies have indicated that an outsized percentage of Gen Z — those now between the ages of roughly 10 and 25 — struggles with anxiety, depression and suicide.

Singh hopes to help tackle those problems as a legislator.

“Part of the reason why I chose to run was to show people my age — or anybody, really — that it is possible to grab life and to chase your dreams and to accomplish what it is that you want to accomplish,” he said. “But you have to fight for it, and to stand up and fight for it. It doesn’t happen just by wishing that things were different.”



## THE UNIQUE MYSTIQUE OF SOUTH FORK ICE

By Ruffin Prevost  
January 9, 2023

### Inaugural Wyoming ice festival draws climbers from across the country

CODY, Wyo. — Dozens of adventurers gathered here over the weekend to strap sharp metal blades to their feet and grip long, pointed axes in each hand before venturing into the Shoshone National Forest in pursuit of their dangerous and elusive prey: frozen waterfalls.

Ice climbers from across the country attended the inaugural Wyoming Ice Festival, a four-day event offering clinics, gear demonstrations, a film screening and social gatherings for enthusiasts eager to climb some of the most challenging ice in the country.

Less than an hour's drive southwest of Cody, ice climbers converge each winter in the South Fork Valley to scale literal frozen

waterfalls. Some are freestanding columns of ice—gargantuan icicles the size of grain silos—unconnected to anything but the ground below and a cliff edge above. Others are towering, multi-levelled cascades of seemingly endless ice, stair-stepping high into the winter clouds overhead.

With roots in mountaineering, and similar to rock climbing, ice climbing uses specialized gear like ice axes and spiked boot attachments called crampons. The Cody area is home to the largest concentration of challenging climbing routes in the U.S. outside of Alaska, aficionados say.

Now in his mid-40s, festival organizer Aaron Mulkey moved to Cody from Boulder, Colo. in his early 20s, specifically because there





*Ice climbers use specialized gear—much of it adapted from or similar to gear used by rock climbers—to scale vertical walls of ice. Typical equipment, clockwise from top, includes: spiked crampons attached to boots; ice screws to anchor ropes; rigid-soled boots; ice axes; a helmet; carabiners to attach to ropes and anchors; insulated gloves; dynamic climbing ropes; and a climbing harness to secure against falls. (Wyoming Truth photo by Ruffin Prevost)*

were so many challenging ice routes.

His goal is to grow the festival into a major annual event that will showcase the region's amazing climbs, and help the local winter tourism economy when business is slowest. Mulkey took over the long-running festival and relaunched it this year with new branding after a hiatus under previous ownership due to the pandemic and other factors.

"This year, we're keeping it small and simple with the goal of focusing on safety," he said. "We have group clinics run by certified guides at really safe spots where we don't have to worry about avalanches or rocks falling."

Nearly all clinic spots were booked before the festival began, Mulkey said, and a number of big-name sponsors like Black Diamond outdoor gear and Ford Bronco

were backing the event. The festival drew approximately 125 attendees, he said.

Attendee Chris Boyle traveled from Bend, Ore. to climb Cody ice for the first time. He arrived early and joined a friend for a few ascents before the festival started.

"The geology here is so different than anywhere else," Boyle said. "It's just amazing climbing."

Eric Henderson traveled from Des Moines, Iowa to climb here for the first time. He was planning a trip to Cody later this year with friends, but chose at the last minute to join the festival.

"I decided to just pull the trigger and come here and sign up for some clinics," he said. "I had heard it was such a big, wild area. I figured that way I could get a good grounding and base for future trips, doing the clinics and talking to locals."

Henderson said he also came to make connections, because he doesn't know any other ice climbers in his hometown.

"It's a specialized sport, it's difficult and it's cold," he said. "And let's face it, you're basically strapping sharp knives to your hands and feet, so it can be scary for some people."

### Climbs for experts and beginners

Cody's reputation for big, challenging, technical ice has made it a haven for experienced climbers, said Chris Guyer, a festival volunteer who moved to Cody from Billings, Mont. because of the big ice.

"Everything here is bigger. The approaches are bigger, and you have a unique feeling of

having a private adventure in the wilderness.

There's a real mystique," Guyer said, using a word other climbers repeated when describing Cody ice.

"The South Fork is so big, so vast, that there might be five other parties climbing out there on a given weekend, but you'd never know it," he said. And after 15 years of climbing the valley, Guyer said he still finds new and challenging routes.

But because just the approaches—hikes from main roads to the bottoms of the ice columns—can be a major challenge for beginners, Mulkey and other local climbers are looking to create a novice-friendly ice park just minutes from downtown Cody.

A few Rocky Mountain towns use sprinklers and other artificial means to "farm" ice into safer, more approachable formations, providing first-timers a tailor-made experience that's easier and more convenient than the big ice in wild, remote locations.

Ice parks are analogous to how climbing gyms have made rock climbing more accessible, Mulkey said, and towns are developing them as a low-cost, low-impact tourist draw.

Creating an ice park in a spot like the Shoshone Canyon, between Cody and the Buffalo Bill Dam, would let climbers drive 10 minutes from the airport or a hotel and start an approachable climb after a 15-minute walk, he said.

Cody Mayor Matt Hall said he has had discussions with local ice climbers about creating an ice park, "but it has never gone past the brainstorming stage."

"But obviously, something like that would take this event from great to the next level," Hall said, "and I'm happy to consider the idea and see how the town could get behind it."

Hall, an experienced rock climber who has yet to strap on ice climbing gear, said he was "excited and grateful to see all the local climbers working to make this a great event."



# FEATURED PHOTOS

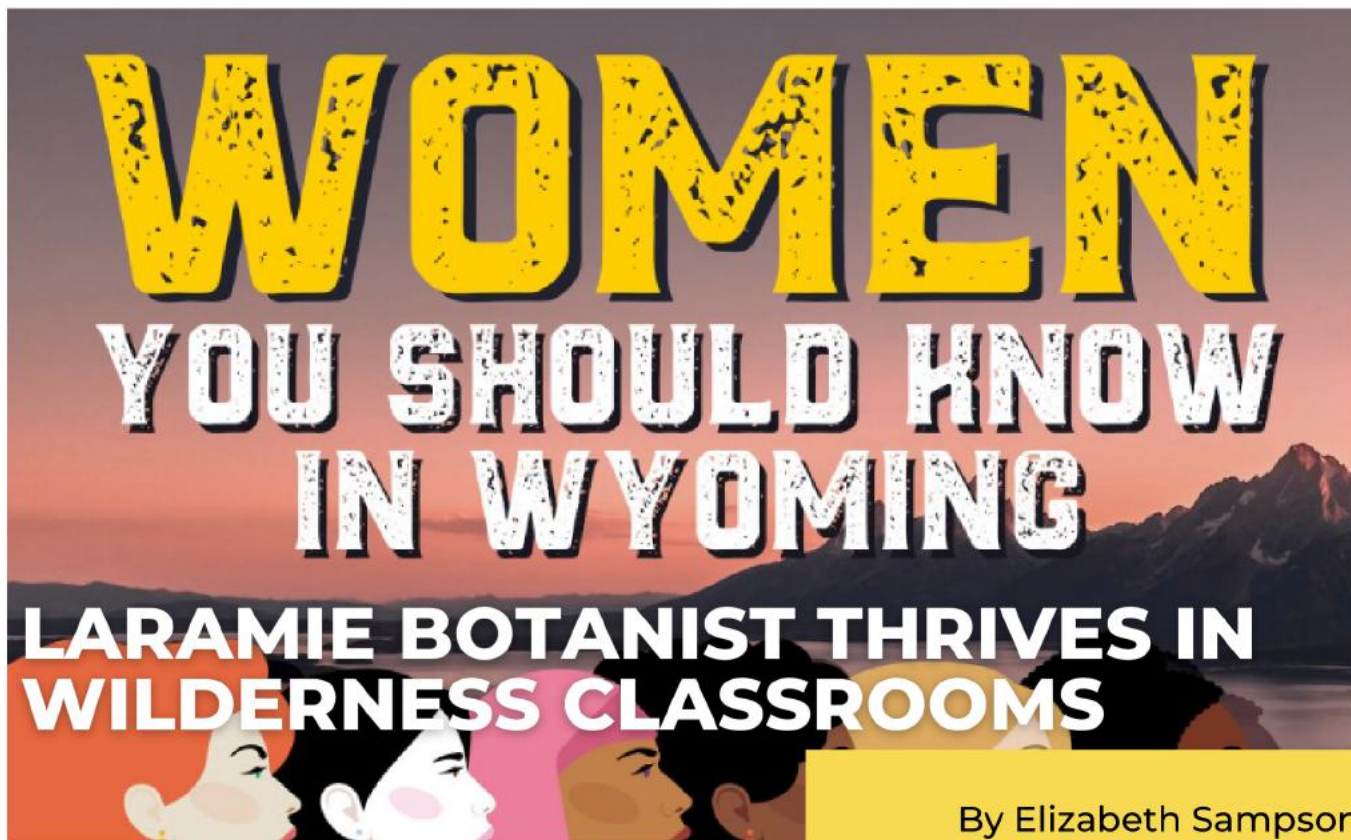


Evening light shines on the mountains above Alpine, Wyoming during a break in the clouds.  
(Wyoming Truth photo by Sam Cook)



A coyote sleuths through the cattails on the National Elk Refuge in Jackson Hole.  
(Wyoming Truth photo by Sam Cook)





By Elizabeth Sampson  
January 25, 2023

**Dorothy Tuthill shares nature knowledge through interactive hikes, camp outs**

Most classes end with a final written test, but Dorothy Tuthill’s students can expect a tent and a campfire instead.

Tuthill’s students are participants in the Wyoming Naturalist Program, which prepares volunteers to become active conservationists who will protect the state’s natural resources.

“Our goal is to develop a group of well-trained and enthusiastic volunteers who contribute their time to conservation in the state of Wyoming,” Tuthill told the Wyoming Truth.

Tuthill, 65, of Laramie, helped launch the program in 2021, and she has organized its basic classes, even teaching a couple

herself. The online classes last 16 weeks and cover topics like geology, ecology and birds; Tuthill teaches classes in botany and mycology. Students finish their basic training at a two-day camp out, where they put their knowledge and skills to practice.

From there, the naturalists contribute 40 volunteer conservation service hours in a year to earn their naturalist certification. About 60 students have completed the training so far, and those newly minted naturalists have provided a combined 1,200 volunteer service hours.

“Some people like to get out and be physical, ripping out old fences for wildlife, but not everybody does that,” Tuthill said. “Any volunteer service that supports a



**Wyoming's nickname is the "Equality State," owing to its pioneering history as the first state to guarantee women the right to vote. And with that spirit in mind, we want to showcase Wyoming's unheralded heroines. "Women You Should Know in Wyoming" is a series that profiles women who are blazing trails and making a difference in their communities. Know someone who fits the bill? Reach out to me at [cynthia@wyomingtruth.org](mailto:cynthia@wyomingtruth.org)**

**-Cynthia Hanson, Editor, the Wyoming Truth**

conservation organization in the state will probably qualify.”

Lifelong nature lover

Tuthill has devoted most of her career to helping people understand and appreciate nature—no surprise, given that her parents were both naturalists. She grew up in Massachusetts but spent her summers in dry sandy places where her father, an entomologist, studied ground-nesting wasps.

“When we weren’t watching wasps, my siblings and I enjoyed painting wildflowers on rocks and playing in streams,” Tuthill recalled. “We always traveled with enough insect nets for everyone, so catching butterflies, dragonflies and beetles were regular pastimes.”

After earning a bachelor’s degree in geology at Cornell College in Iowa, Tuthill knew she wanted to study living things in graduate

school. She earned a master’s degree and doctorate in botany from the University of Wyoming, where she studied mycology and researched the genus *Penicillium*.

Helping to organize the Wyoming Naturalist program is not the only way Tuthill connects Wyomingites with nature. As the associate director and education coordinator for the University of Wyoming Biodiversity Institute, she takes science to the citizens through educational events statewide.

Enter Wyoming BioBlitz, an annual weekend camping trip that brings together scientists and nature lovers to study plants and wildlife, as well as collect data for scientific study. Tuthill is on the organizing committee for the public event, a cooperative effort with the Biodiversity Institute, Audubon Rockies and Wyoming State Parks. This year, BioBlitz will take place at Medicine Lodge State Archaeological Site—home to big rock cliffs and big trees, with ample hiking options.

“The object of the BioBlitz is to spend a weekend intensely studying all the organisms in a particular place,” she said. “Last summer, we were at Guernsey State Park. We found hundreds of species there that we were able to document—so insects, plants, birds, herps.”

For Tuthill, the most exciting BioBlitz took place at Bear River State Park.

“We were allowed to set up tents in a lovely grassy, shaded area,” Tuthill said. “However, as the river started to overflow its banks the next day, we all had to move to higher ground. Then Sunday, during breakfast, it snowed. Nonetheless, we were treated to hillsides of blue penstemons and a meadow of magenta shooting stars.”

Jacelyn Downey, the education programs manager for Audubon Rockies, loves learning from Tuthill.

“If you go on a hike with somebody else, maybe they would just be interested in the destination they are headed to,” Downey said. “If you go on a hike with Dorothy, she is going to be excited about everything you could possibly see on the way, stopping to identify a tiny little plant and asking why is that plant growing there? Is there a pollinator there, and why is that pollinator there? What is the soil like?”

### Natural fun

The natural world isn't just Tuthill's workplace; it's also where she finds her fun. An accomplished weaver, she uses wool and plant fibers to make coats, shawls and dishtowels.

Tuthill has served on the board of the Wyoming Native Plants Society for as long as she can remember. The organization holds just one meeting a year: a weekend of camping and inspecting plants.

One of her favorite spots is Chalk Mountain, located on the northwest side of Shirley Basin. “There are really unique plants that are mostly about four inches tall, because it's a big, windswept flat mountain top,” Tuthill explained. “There are really interesting little flowers, but you have to go in the spring before everything dries up.”

For Tuthill, the natural world provides a welcome escape from the pressures of daily life.

“When I go outside I forget about the concerns I have about work, about paying bills and all those other things,” Tuthill said. “I can go out, and I can look at the plants and

the insects and the birds. It's like having hundreds of very diverse neighbors to converse with—and they don't talk back.”

Still, she cautions those new to Wyoming's outdoor spaces to always plan ahead: “We all know the weather can change really fast in Wyoming. Never go outside without a jacket, no matter how warm it is when you leave home. And, of course, [don't forget] water.”



*Dorothy Tuthill helped found the Wyoming Naturalist Program which trains volunteers around the state in conservation. (Courtesy photo from Dorothy Tuthill)*



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)



Located  
12 Miles  
East of  
Cheyenne



THE BARN  
@  
KENNISON'S

The ideal venue for...

Weddings

Parties

Dances

Riding Clinics

Overnight Horse Boarding

Plus...catering!



**KENNISONSKATERING.COM**

Contact Ami Kennison 951.226.6295