

PARK CITY MUNICIPAL COMMUNITY NEWS INTERVIEW

THE BACKBONE OF OUR COMMUNITY

LIZA SIMPSON REFLECTS ON A LONG AND STORIED CAREER AS A COMMUNITY & PUBLIC SERVANT



**Park City Municipal Corporation:** *What originally brought you to Park City?*

**Liza Simpson:** I moved here in 1989 from southern Utah: I had gone through a divorce and wanted a fresh start and a bit of distance, so a friend invited me to stay at her condo in Park City. I have a background in food service, so I got a job at Mrs. Field's Cookies on Main Street, and my first weekend in town I sold Robert Redford a brownie. I took that as a sign that I belonged here. My first thought was "what a cool town!"

**PCMC:** *That does seem like an auspicious omen. How did your career progress from there?*

**LS:** I worked my way up to manager of the cookie store, and I also managed their sister restaurant, La Petite Boulangerie.

**PCMC:** *What came next?*

**LS:** Well, as we all know, careers are often more circuitous than they are linear. I next went to work for a bed and breakfast in town: the Old Miner's Lodge, which used to be on Woodside Avenue. The lodge was run by Hugh Daniels and Susan Wynne, who now both work for the city. I didn't know what to expect, but my first winter there I fell in love with the job and the industry. I moved from housekeeper to innkeeper, and eventually became co-manager with Susan from 1998 to 2004. In 2004, Hugh and Susan sold the B&B, so I next went to work for Java Cow. I started out as a baker and ended up as their general manager. I held that position until I was elected to City Council in 2008.

**PCMC:** *Why couldn't you do both?*

**LS:** I realized that managing a business wouldn't be feasible given the commitments required for City Council. It wasn't just a matter of the hours, but also the lack of flexibility. So I made a very conscious decision to take a step back, career-wise, and find a position that would

work with my new role. I moved over to Dolly's Bookstore, where I still currently work.

**PCMC:** *think people often forget some of the sacrifices that public servants make.*

**LS:** To do it right you need to commit both the time and energy.

**PCMC:** *You were first elected to City Council in 2007. What prompted you to run?*

**LS:** I've always been involved politically. I remember helping my mother print campaign posters out on dot-matrix printers in our Berkeley, California, living room. Since I've lived in Park City I've volunteered for Peace House, helped with various fund-raisers, and served on the Recreation Advisory Board. I had always supported and campaigned for other candidates, but I never considered running myself until I was recruited by (former mayor) Dana Williams. Dana thought I would provide a good perspective, so I decided to finally throw my own hat in the ring. I was elected in November of 2007 and began my term in 2008.

**PCMC:** *How did you approach the job?*

**LS:** As the oldest of five children, I come by my bossiness naturally, which can certainly come in handy. But I also always do my homework, most likely a result of my career in operations. I didn't have doubts about my ability to do the job, but I knew there would be a learning curve. This was before the new-council-member orientation had been instituted, so I took it upon myself to set up a standing weekly meeting with the city manager, as well as one with the budget director. I also made a commitment to learn about the city services from the inside out, which meant riding the snow plows and hanging out with the streets crews doing asphalt repairs, as well as holding face-to-face meetings with staff. There's no substitute for just getting out there and talking to the people who do the jobs

day in and day out.

**PCMC:** *Do you have faith in our system of local governance?*

**LS:** Absolutely. We struggle with community outreach and productively engaging our citizens, but we have to remember that our residents didn't move to Park City to go to public meetings: they came to enjoy everything the place has to offer. So we need to balance engagement with governance: we should listen to people's opinions (and going door-to-door can be the most effective way of learning what people really think), but we should also remember that we're elected to make well-reasoned and informed decisions on behalf of the people who put us here.

**PCMC:** *How would you evaluate the current City Council and the impact you are having?*

**LS:** This is such an exciting time to be serving. We've built strong relationships with other governing bodies in the region (Mountain Accord is a notable example), and these are crucial for moving us forward as a community. We're better positioned than we have been in the past to make meaningful decisions on a regional level.

And we have a great group of council members—both present and future. Their leadership will be vital.

**PCMC:** *Contrary to some other governing bodies, the tone of discourse for Park City's council is quite civil. How do you think this contributes to your success in governing?*

**LS:** Frankly, it makes our jobs easier. Knowing that we can and should disagree without begin disagreeable helps us reach consensus on the really tough decisions. (And it doesn't hurt that we all often go out for drinks afterward.) Dana—as well as Roger Harlan, Candy Erickson, Jim Heir, and many other elected officials and staff—instituted this culture, and I'm so grateful that they did. I would not have considered running if the discourse had been as combative as it is in some other municipalities.

**PCMC:** *As you step away from the dais, do you have one project or initiative of which you are especially proud?*

**LS:** I don't think anyone's legacy can be distilled into one initiative, but I will say that I smile every time I walk by the seasonal housing at the transit center. Because of my background, I understood that we had a better chance of recruiting highly trained bus drivers for the winter season if we could provide them housing. These folks may work in a national park during the summer, for example, then

come to Park City for the snow. Providing convenient and affordable housing for them is a strong differentiator for us. And having it so close to the depot allows the city to be all the more responsive.

**PCMC:** *So you identified a clear and justifiable need for the housing. How did you integrate it into the larger transit center project?*

**LS:** During the programming phase, I cajoled, badgered, and convinced the other members of City Council to plan the site so that housing could be added down the line, once funding had been secured. Dave Gustafson, one of the city's project managers, also had the foresight to design in the infrastructure. This was a brilliant leap of faith because the city didn't have the money at the time. Kent Cashel, our former transportation planning manager, was then able to secure a grant from the Federal Transportation Authority. I believe this was the first time an FTA grant had been used for housing, which tells you just how innovative the idea was. But our foresight has really paid off.

**PCMC:** *What a great example of unconventional thinking. Conversely, do you wish you could have a "do-over" for any big initiative?*

**LS:** I wish we could have pulled off a deal for Treasure (Hill). Everyone involved worked so hard to reach a compromise. We were three yards from the end zone but just couldn't get across the goal line.

**PCMC:** *Well we need to leave some challenges for future councils, I suppose! What's next for you?*

**LS:** I'm taking a breather before I figure out my next career step, and having this mental space just to think and take stock of everything has been a wonderful gift.

**PCMC:** *Do you have any other thoughts you would like to share?*

**LS:** I just want to thank the city staff. They helped me learn the ropes, and they taught me how to be a good council person. I've always tried to advocate for staff in my role as an elected official because I understand how hard everyone works. It's the people—from the yoga teacher to the city manager—who make the difference.

**PCMC:** *Thank you for being such an inspiring leader, both for city staff and the community as a whole.*