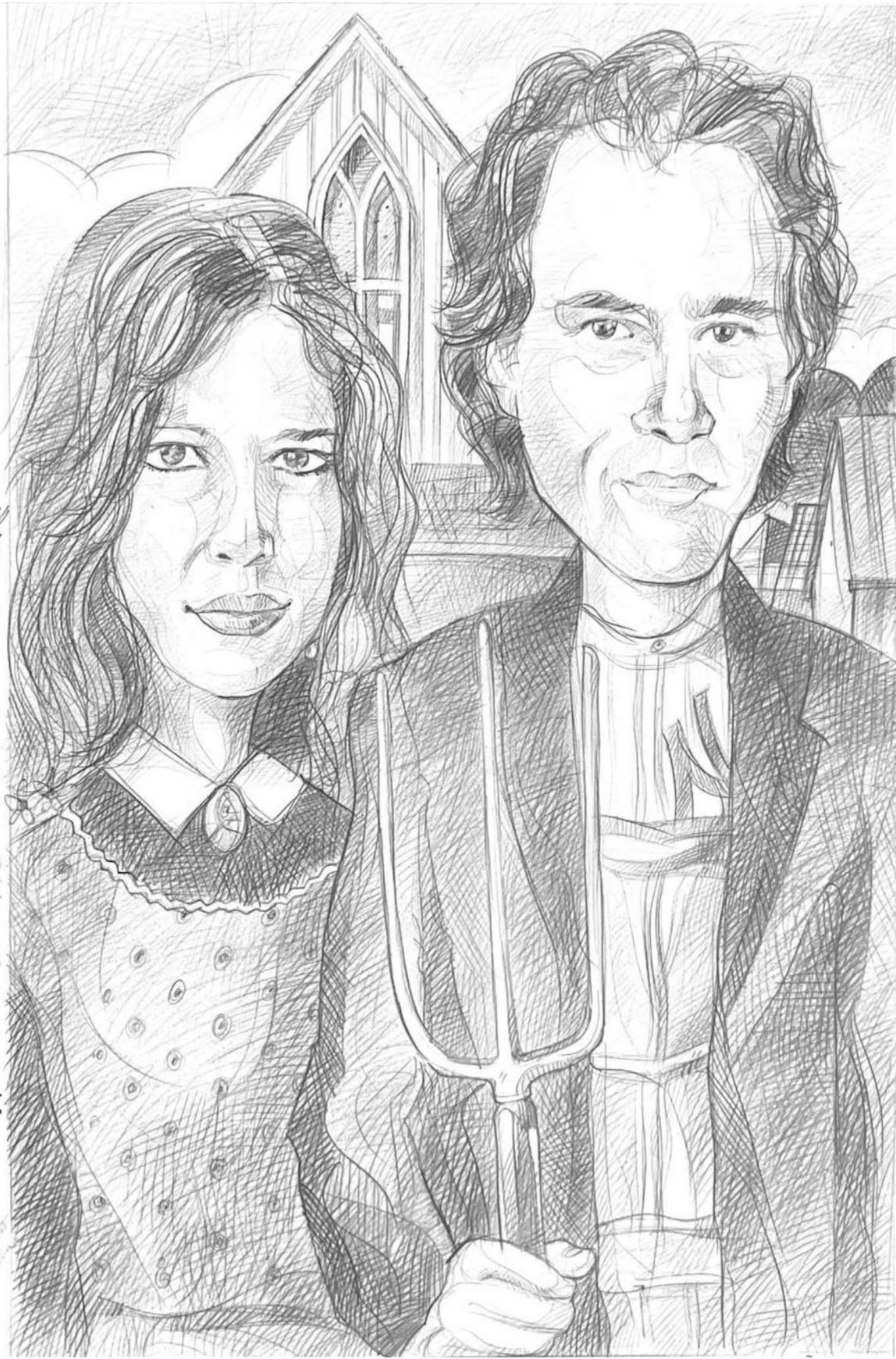


# OPINION

## The First Amendment

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or the press, or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.

# Signing off with thanks after 30 years of a dream job



## Amid ups and downs I relished hearing, amplifying Iowans



**Rekha Basu**  
Columnist  
Des Moines Register  
USA TODAY NETWORK

I started work at the Register Nov. 4, 1991, three days after a disgruntled University of Iowa grad student opened fire in a department office, killing five of his six victims, including himself. The lone survivor was Miya Rodolfo-Sioson, a 23-year-old student and temp in the office that day, who was left paralyzed from the neck down.

When I later interviewed her, a passionate, idealistic young woman committed to seeking justice for Central America, she had every reason to be angry or despondent. She needed attendants to do everything; her only control was through a mouthpiece. Yet she felt privileged to still be alive, continuing to work toward her cherished causes and nurturing hopes of someday traveling abroad, getting her master's, marrying and adopting kids.

Meeting her changed me, as countless encounters with sources have done in the 30-plus years I've written columns here. Her resilience and acceptance of what she

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In 2000, before columnists Rekha Basu and Rob Borsellino left Des Moines for a year, Register illustrator Mark Marturello drew this "American Gothic" sendup for them. Basu's final column as a Register staffer was published today after 30 years with the newspaper as an editorial writer and opinion columnist.

MARK MARTURELLO/ILLUSTRATION  
SPECIAL TO THE REGISTER

**I hope my unlikely path will encourage some young person uncertain of their goals in life to worry less, and be guided more by their passions:  
Harness that anger, outrage, alienation and grief into a career path.  
Use the sensitivity you may have been teased about as a strength.  
Take risks to do what you love.**

# DEMOCRATS OWE IOWANS A COMPLETE REBOOT



**Your Turn**  
Jack Hatch  
Guest columnist

Iowa Democrats were wiped out of every federal office and all but one of the statewide offices while losing seats in both the Iowa House and Senate. This is the first time in more than a half-century in which one party controlled all of the state's U.S. Senate and House seats.

The Iowa red wave happened against the backdrop of a pretty good cycle nationally for Democrats. Conventional wisdom says midterm elections are never the best barom-

See DEMOCRATS, Page 2F



Iowa Democrats watch intently as the election results come in during the party's election night watch event at the Hotel Fort Des Moines in Des Moines on Nov. 8. BRYON HOULGRAVE/THE REGISTER

EDITORIAL THE REGISTER

## Stop stacking up pointless debt after convictions

Lawmakers need to make another attempt next year to rebalance the scales when it comes to the competing interests of compensating victims of crime, rehabilitating people convicted of crimes, deterring future offenses and operating the justice system.

A law passed in 2020 fixed some things and broke some others. The sometimes-abstract topic has attracted more focused outrage in the past year because of the case of a Des Moines teenager who was ordered to pay \$150,000 in restitution to the heirs of a 37-year-old man

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# LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

## Stop cuts to surgical reimbursements

In less than a month, the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services' (CMS) will implement a nearly 4.5% cut to Medicare if Congress fails to act. Combined with a 4% Medicare cut stemming from the Statutory Pay-As-You-Go (PAY-GO) Act, this means that surgical care faces a nearly 8.5% cut in the new year.

The bipartisan H.R. 8800, the Supporting Medicare Providers Act of 2022, is a step in the right direction towards stopping CMS's destabilizing cuts. Congress must now work urgently to pass this legislation to stop these harmful cuts outright and support our health care system. As a surgeon, I know that failure to do so would put our seniors in serious risk.

Right now, after years of destabilizing disinvestment, surgical care teams and the seniors they serve don't need further cuts to Medicare.

— *Dr. Jeffrienne S. Young, Des Moines*

## Hospital report was alarming

Anyone hospitalized or had a loved one hospitalized in an Iowa hospital in the last few years would not have been surprised with the detailed Iowa Capital Dispatch story documenting that many of our Iowa hospitals had been cited by the state for substandard patient care or cleanliness of critical areas.

The reasons are varied and some try to blame factors outside their control such as skyrocketing operating ex-

penses and staff shortages. But my takeaway from the story is that the slick local television commercials can't cover up serious deficiencies that should be the concern of us all and the public should not be distracted by their feel-good messages.

— *Lloyd Kaufman, Des Moines*

## Reynolds is not Ray

I recently watched the first episode of the documentary "Governors of Iowa" on Iowa PBS, which profiled former Iowa Gov. Bob Ray. A lifelong Republican, Ray served as governor from 1958 to 1972, hence gaining the label "Governor for Life."

He was immensely popular, winning five full terms before retiring in 1982. What made Ray so endearing to Iowans? He was extremely fair-minded in his approach to governing, because he was a true public servant. In other words, he took the role of public service serious, always putting the needs of the people above politics. He was also a committed humanitarian, proven by his facilitating the resettlement of thousands of Southeast Asian war refugees into Iowa. In doing so, he also worked with the Jimmy Carter administration for their assistance, despite immense blow-back from some within his own party.

In light of Iowa's current governor, I thought of that famous moment in the 1988 vice-presidential debate between Lloyd Bentson and Dan Quayle, in which Quayle compared himself to John Kennedy. Bentson replied with his leg-

endary response. "Senator, I served with Jack Kennedy. I knew Jack Kennedy. Jack Kennedy was a friend of mine. Senator, you're no Jack Kennedy."

I voted for Bob Ray several times, in spite of my Democratic leanings. I even got to shake his hand once. I have no qualms in proclaiming, "Kim Reynolds, you're no Bob Ray."

— *Tim Wagner, Decorah*

## Tell our leaders what you're thinking

Feeling down, upset, frustrated, ready to call it a day? There's at least one solution. Write a letter to your local or national politician with something you always wanted to say, or more if needed. Maybe something nice or just sandblast an issue.

Letters to the editor are nice, but competition for space is limited. Write directly to the source and use your carpentry skills to hit the nail on the head. And don't give up if there is no response. Our governor is a non-responder for one example. It's usually a one-way trip for your efforts.

Almost every politician has a website making it convenient to send a message. No doubt there is a person other than the recipient sorting the mail. That's OK! Your message will have an impact and that's what you want.

Federal officials only like mail from their constituents and they have facilities to leave messages. They don't want outsiders leaving opinions. If you are a non-resident, it's not a problem. Take their Washington address and do a per-

sonal letter. Your opinion still counts since it probably relates to other letters they are receiving.

Everyone has an opinion or two. Time to share it and I'll betcha it'll make you feel better and quite proud.

— *John Carver, Decorah*

## Democrats need only some nominating tweaks

Yeah, Democrats struggle in Iowa, but that's all the more reason to keep Iowa in the mix, to see what works here and how they can gear their message toward other states like Iowa. Holding early primaries in states where you're strong does nothing for you in states where you're weak. The Democratic National Committee should consider the following:

Nevada, New Hampshire, Iowa, and South Carolina are good choices for holding early primaries. They represent diverse parts of the country, and they're small enough that an unfunded campaign can gain some traction.

There's no reason why Iowa should go first every time. Better would be to rotate the first-up position between these four states. That would give each section of the country its chance to showcase their concerns and have a major impact on the initial stages of an election.

Do away with the caucus and use ballots as you would in any normal election. The caucus is fun, but it allows no chance for working people or people with family obligations to participate.

— *Cecil Cook, West Des Moines*

## Democrats

Continued from Page 1F

eter of a national mood, frequently producing a predictable backlash against the performance of the president's party.

Then a strange thing happened — the political center held. Democrats continued to control the U.S. Senate and lost a handful of seats in the U.S. House, not the dozens that were forecast. Democrats added governors, and, for the first time since 1934, not a single Democratic-held legislative chamber anywhere in the country changed hands.

Iowa's performance was an outlier. Republicans were not only able to break the overall trend of the cycle but run the table and win very competitive seats they were losing elsewhere.

Iowa Democrats enter, yet again, a period of reflection, redesign and, I hope, re-emergence as a competitive and relevant political organization. As a veteran of previous election reviews and postmortems, including as a statewide candidate, I'm certain there are lessons we have yet to learn and steps we've yet to generate a willingness to take.

Nothing less than a total reboot of the Iowa Democratic Party must be on the table.

## Attempts to gain ground for 2022 didn't work

Candidate-blaming is my least favorite enterprise, for obvious reasons, but let's lay off the Democrats who stepped up in 2022. There were bright spots, and Adm. Mike Franken's late-cycle strong polling performance is at the top of the list. A solid campaign that really was competitive for a while. That's meaningful, but Iowa Democrats had no grassroots campaign, and the state party organization collapsed.

The challenges Iowa Democrats face are deeper, take place earlier in the process and require a lot of hard work that will happen beneath the surface. Now is the time to remember Albert Einstein's definition of insanity: doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results. Democrats have to change their approach — dramatically, or we will fall further and further behind when it comes to holding and exercising power at the state level.

The 2022 outcomes did little to inspire confidence in the underlying fundamentals for Democrats. The party continues to be outorganized, outspent and saddled with too many independent messages. Since 2014, Republicans have registered more voters than Democrats, and they have turned out more voters at higher rates, especially in midterm elections.

The reboot starts with an overhaul of the party structure, which includes selecting new party leadership willing to do anything but continue the status quo, and a new governing board more lean and more engaged than the existing bloated state central committee.

It's important to note we did attempt to retool our campaign coordination efforts in 2022, without much to show for it. The Hughes Project largely functioned as a rechanneling of the same dollars into a stronger attempt to coordinate the message, the polling and the organizing.

We continue to operate from the premise that Democrats have more votes available in Iowa. The hurdles have been registration, voter contact and turnout. There are 23 states with Democratic networks similar to the skeleton organization that the Hughes Project was fostering with an infrastructure capable of harnessing more dollars and sharing more information to all campaigns. In some places, it's referred to as "walls-down" infrastructure.

What it permits is better state-level coordination of activities, sharing of funding sources, coordinated po-



Sandy Hecht of Des Moines covers her face in disappointment as results come in during the Iowa Democratic Party election night watch party at the Hotel Fort Des Moines on Nov. 8. BRYON HOULGRAVE/THE REGISTER

litical messaging and maximization of volunteer efforts. It means that while we understand the independent nature of campaigns, we leverage shared functions that include registration, get-out-the-vote and messaging. The new Iowa Democratic Party should incorporate the Hughes Project's infrastructure without delay with new political leadership supported by county parties and Iowa donors.

## Citizen engagement: Let the people speak

While there is plenty to be reformed in Iowa, I'll focus on a successful citizen engagement initiative as foundational to any the new organizational effort. No matter what else we do, direct engagement of Iowa voters must come first. We can throw as many dollars as our consultants tell us to into the late stages of a general election campaign, but we will never be successful if our voter identification process lags that of our competitors.

We know voters want to be involved. But so much of our political activity is fired off into the void as social media posts that do little but reinforce the brand identification our base already has with our product. A new "citizen engagement" initiative would capture elements of that activity and harness it to support old-school organizing.

The new system would provide direct voter contact through digital communications on a regular basis on policy and political topics at the state and federal level, providing a mechanism for a thoughtful two-way communications loop. The key element will be interactivity — the chance to be heard, not just shout back in pep-rally-style agreement or opposition.

We need real civic discourse where people on the ground can share their feedback openly, honestly and safely to find the messages and, more importantly, the policies that resonate where all voters can get behind. If we do this, Iowa Democrats can build winning coalitions across demographic, partisan, ethnic, geographical, and ideological lines.

It's time to build upon a branded digital engagement platform that goes beyond social media advertising, that talks to voters and creates a structure for them to talk back as part of a community. Such firms as Countable, and its platform causes.com, can build a digital hub for state parties for supporters to engage and take

action. State party organizations will be armed with a platform to facilitate a truly ground-up and civil conversation to advance our values, not just our candidates. And this is just the starting point. This digital community can grow into a network of subcommunities for states by region, issue, or affinity group, and it can connect like-minded causes and networks. It can tap into the metaverse.

A comprehensive, free, secure, subscriber-based digital network can also blend with a real-world ground game. Users can register to vote, pledge to vote, find their polling place, create a plan to vote and turn out others, and contact their lawmakers through a mix of native platform features and embedded tools.

## Change will come from the periphery

But now what we need to thoroughly understand is this: How do people create change? How we can guide them to change? Where, and how, can change actually be created or awakened?

Former Gov. Bob Ray understood this. He said, "Iowans want to move forward, they just don't like change."

Ironically, it does not come from within the organization, which is where we all start, and it will not come from the influencers you have in the organization, or the community like the existing State Central Committee of the Iowa Democratic Party. They are the ones that will sabotage it, because in spite of what comes out of their mouth, they don't want change and will do everything to keep the status quo.

Why do we love to talk about innovation, but refuse to change?

Change comes from the periphery, not the center or from within. It comes from people such as small-town retailers, blue collar assembly workers, teachers, homemakers, bartenders, entrepreneurs and youth and women with a common-sense or a new idea.

If Iowans don't understand that our exceptional future is in the balance, then let's do the same thing over and over again; but if we are, indeed, looking into the abyss of chaos, then let's get to work and "let the people speak."

*Jack Hatch of Des Moines is a former state senator and the 2014 Democratic nominee for Iowa governor. He is an organizer of the Hughes Project.*

# VOICES & COMMENTARY

## Kim Reynolds can be an even bigger player on the national stage



**Your Turn**  
Dave Nagle  
Guest columnist

One of the most overlooked winners from the off-year elections was Iowa's own Kim Reynolds, a winner not only in the Hawkeye State but across the nation in GOP circles. Her stunning sweep of the election in Iowa is almost certain to attract vice presidential speculation and forecasts a prominent role for her over the next two years.

This was a candidate for re-election who did not try to appeal to the muddling middle circles of the voters but went hard to the conservative wing of the Republican Party and successfully won not only her own race but swept into office major majorities in both houses of the Iowa Legislature and saw the capture of a slew of countywide races. Not only that, but she campaigned with Donald Trump, and in the closing days of the contest invoked Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis' anti-woke campaign calling out bathroom use and sports participation by transgender youths and promising to rein in teachers' classroom instruction.

All of this brings us to the last two points in our governor's arsenal for an appearance on the national stage. First, Iowa is the first step in the presidential nominating process for the GOP. That means that not only will the current front-runners be here, but a host of other contenders as well, and with them the national press. The governor's comments and observations will be national news. It affords Reynolds the opportunity to get to know all the potential future leaders of the Republican Party, find common ground on issues and forge relationships. Second, the governor speaks not only as a winning political leader but as head of the Republican National Governors Association.

This second point may be more important than most realize. Prior to 1972, a little-known, but perceived-to-be-modern southern governor held the po-



Gov. Kim Reynolds visits with guests during fifth annual Harvest Festival at the Paul R. Knapp Animal Learning Center at the Iowa State Fairgrounds in Des Moines on Oct. 1. The fundraiser features guest speakers, live music, food, pumpkin decorating, and balloon animals. LEE NAVIN/FOR THE REGISTER

sition as head of the Democratic Governors Association and went on to become president of the United States. His name was Jimmy Carter. Prior to 1992 and before running for president, the head of the Democratic Governors Association was a southern governor from Arkansas, a guy by the name of Bill Clinton.

However, the road for Reynolds to run in Iowa herself for president would seem to be closed. Sen. Tom Harkin tried it in 1992, and with all other candidates staying out of the race, won 75% support in the Iowa caucuses. The following Tuesday, New Hampshire ignored him and gave first place to a New Englander, Paul Tsongas, and awarded second to Clinton.

A few additional observations based on 50 years of watching and advising individuals who came to our state seeking the nation's highest office: From an

Iowan standpoint, remember that if 10 people seek the office, three are going to leave happy and seven with deep disappointment. It is important to see that all who try at least acknowledged that they were treated kindly and fairly.

Second, the national press is not the Iowa press. Many governors in dealing with them attempt to treat the writers and correspondents as part of the good old crowd. They are not. And while a regular news conference is attended by members of the fourth estate who rely on the governor's office for regular state-house news, these people do not. Best have one or two with you who have dealt with national press, and many mistakes can be avoided.

Finally, both parties' caucuses need to be first in the nation. Democrats losing their favored status in the calendar will not go unnoticed by other states

who covet Iowa Republicans' status as well. The danger is that losing one could lead to losing both. Besides, it is probably good politics to fight the national Democratic Party for picking on poor little Iowa.

Seeking high office and a national profile is not without risk. Remember the admonition of the ancient Greeks, "Quos Deus vult perdere, prius dementat." In English, it is said "Whom the Gods destroy, they first make mad." Many attempt to venture on the national scene. It is best to remember that a guarantee of success does not accompany it. But many Iowa Republicans would agree: Nothing ventured, nothing gained.

*Dave Nagle is a Waterloo attorney and former congressman. This essay was first published in the Waterloo-Cedar Falls Courier.*

## Editorial

Continued from Page 1F

who she says raped her repeatedly before she killed him.

Pieper Lewis of Des Moines was 16 when she killed Zachary Brooks. She was without a home and a victim of trafficking. Nobody has been charged in the abuse she experienced. The restitution order to pay Brooks' estate prompted national outrage, and her lawyer is seeking to have a district judge reconsider it.

That law in particular needs at least some updating. But other laws on this topic aren't serving the people's interests, either.

It would be one thing if burying people convicted of crimes in debt was a direct and unavoidable consequence of making victims whole, reducing crime rates and ensuring that Iowa's courts and corrections systems were shining examples of how to rehabilitate offenders, maintain their dignity and set them up for success.

Instead, a primary effect of onerous debts is to complicate the climb to a manageable life both while Iowans are in jail or prison and after they leave. Meanwhile, restitution awards often provide only nominal compensation to victims. Plus, the court costs, criminal fines and nickel-and-diming charges at correctional institutions save taxpayers a couple of bucks on the justice system, while they weigh down people years after they complete other parts of their sentences.

An overhaul passed in 2020 transformed the schedules of fees, fines and surcharges. But advocates said it made worse the procedures for indigent Iowans to limit how much they owe, including charges for their legal defense



Pieper Lewis speaks during a sentencing hearing Sept. 13 in Des Moines. The Des Moines teen pleaded guilty to killing in June 2020 a man who had raped her. ZACH BOYDEN-HOLMES/REGISTER FILE PHOTO

and for the time they spend in jail and prison.

It's a complex and confusing system; Iowans need their lawyers not just to represent them in court but also to help decipher the amount and nature of their debts. Untangling this bureaucratic mess will take study and care.

Lawmakers in the new legislative session in January can make simple changes to improve the statute requiring payment of \$150,000 in restitution by people convicted of felony charges in cases where people die.

The provision attracted little public attention when it was passed in 1997; news coverage focused on another part of the bill that aimed to restrict nude dancing at "juice bars" that didn't serve alcohol. Senators at one point sought to require defendants to pay \$1 million, but

\$150,000 was the amount that stuck.

The Iowa Supreme Court ruled in a 5-3 decision in 2000 that the \$150,000 restitution requirement — though unusual among states — was consistent with the federal and state constitutions; Justice Louis Lavorato wrote for the dissenters that whether the penalty was cruel and unusual punishment should be decided case by case.

The penalty in Iowa law does not limit what people can recover in a civil wrongful-death lawsuit, and there is something to be said for making civil suits the primary mechanism for recovery. While new litigation adds pain and expense for victims' families, an award is more likely to take the defendant's needs into consideration.

Lewis, the Des Moines teenager, is arguing in court that subsequent Iowa and

U.S. supreme court decisions call into question the way Iowa's \$150,000 orders have been handled. (That Lewis is now accused of violating her probation and that an online fundraiser for her has netted over half a million dollars don't change the principles at work here.)

The wisdom of this mandatory penalty was questionable from the start. Lawmakers should, at least, explicitly give judges authority to decide whether the circumstances of a crime warrant restitution.

The debts that people are accumulating in their journeys through the justice system give many little chance to succeed outside the justice system. The rigid restitution law is a good place to start fixing that.

— Lucas Grundmeier, on behalf of the Register editorial board

### The Des Moines Register

- Carol Hunter, executive editor
- Lucas Grundmeier, opinion editor
- Rachelle Chase, opinion columnist
- Richard Doak, editorial board member
- Rox Laird, editorial board member

### How to contact us

**Email:** (515) 284-8142 or lgrundme@dmreg.com  
**Customer Service:** Automated service 24/7 (toll-free) at (877) 424-0225. To talk with a customer service representative, hours are 8 a.m. to 7 p.m. Monday to Friday and 7:30 a.m. to noon Sunday.

### How to submit letters

All letters and guest opinions submitted to The Des Moines Register must be the original work of the author. All submissions may be edited for length, accuracy and clarity and may be published or distributed in print, electronic or other forms. Preference is given to letters that are 200 words or fewer.  
**Email:** letters@dmreg.com. **Include:** Your complete name, home address and daytime telephone number for verification.

# Basu

Continued from Page 1F

couldn't control are traits I've come to associate with many Iowans, an attitude occasioned perhaps in some cases by the vagaries of farm life, like the unpredictability of rain.

But if Rodolfo-Sioson's wish to keep living taught me one lesson, my friend Louise Noun's wish to die, which she shared with me in confidence in 2002, was a different wake-up call. She was hoping I'd take up her advocacy for the right to assisted suicide. But I had long believed that if a friend tells you of plans to end their life, it's your job to prevent that by whatever means.

At 94, of sound mind yet facing increasing bodily infirmity, the feminist philanthropist, free-speech advocate and author had done all she wanted to, and was ready to go. She planned to check out as soon as she could find a method of doing so and wanted me to write about it only after she was gone. Meanwhile, I had to keep it a secret, even from my husband and mother. I tried to argue that she still had much to contribute, and that I'd miss her greatly. She had to remind me this wasn't about me. And ultimately I had to learn to accept her decision for the same reason I believe a woman must have the right to choose whether or not to bear a child. It was her body and her choice.

Now, as I leave this job, I think back on some of the ways it has forced me to rethink some of the values I held as absolute. Because every opinion column you write is a statement of values. And sometimes figuring out where you stand requires digging deeper — both into the story and into yourself. A very different sort of death that haunted Iowans in the '90s was shrouded in ambiguity. A mother was charged with second-degree murder in the death of her 2-week-old son, and sentenced to 50 years in prison. At first she had claimed she'd left him unattended in a bathtub. Suspicion naturally mounted when she led investigators to the site of his body, buried under rocks in Saylorville Lake.

But why? By all accounts, Heidi Anfinson was a loving mother who had wanted this child. Her husband was on her side.

There's little support or empathy for mothers who gave birth only to face a severe crisis like postpartum psychosis, which Anfinson eventually acknowledged having, after serving 12 years of a 50-year sentence. That's an extreme form of depression that can hit a woman after giving birth, bringing on hallucinations and paranoia. In England, greater awareness of it had resulted in the government not criminally charging a mother in her baby's death within the first 12 months.

It would take a lone juror's courageous refusal to go along with the other jurors' wish to convict Anfinson of second-degree murder that ultimately guided my thinking. That juror may not have known the full story, but she knew enough to know Anfinson didn't intend to murder her son. "A juror of conviction says no," was the headline of my column. There would be another trial in which Anfinson was convicted and served 12 years in prison before she was paroled.

Writing opinions for a living in a community as connected as ours is a privilege and a risk, considering all the ways you could get it wrong. It takes some combination of head, heart and hard data to figure out where to land. Time after time in this job, I've had to challenge myself to look deeper, ask different questions of people involved, and remain open to changing my mind. Many times, my conclusions have angered some readers. But other times, the right answer has been clear as daylight. Yet some law enforcement official, legislator, doctor, judge or school board member, among others, did the wrong thing because of expediency, bias, cowardice, ignorance or expected benefit.

There was the low-income mother of two who drew a four-year prison sen-

tence because of escalating traffic fines she couldn't afford to pay. The more she drove to work to earn money to feed her kids, the higher the debt mounted. Denouncing the sentence, I wrote, "When she gets out as an ex-convict, she'll have an even tougher time finding a job and making a living. Her network will be offenders. Her children will have been raised without a parent. All so society could be safe from a poor mother who couldn't pay her fines."

There was the Madison County domestic-violence survivor whose ex-husband broke a restraining order by going to her home at night and trying to suffocate her. Police were called. He was charged, but not with violation of the no-contact order. Yet incredibly, she was charged with aiding and abetting violation of a no-contact order. Asked about this, the Madison County attorney lectured me on how women shouldn't let themselves be victims. Years later he himself would be charged with domestic abuse.

There was the Carroll High School teacher who lost her job of 15 years after police raided her home and found a small amount of pot belonging to her son. Yet she was forced to move south where she had family, to start over again. The column decried the unfairness.

"Where is Des Moines women's anger about social issues?" asked one of my early pieces after a local judge at a judicial conference quipped in public remarks about using part of a woman's anatomy as a vase. Why couldn't Iowa pass the simplest amendment to its constitution asserting the equality of men and women? Why was no one publicly standing up for choice when a Planned Parenthood sponsor was intimidated by anti-choice groups into pulling its funding from rural health clinics?

I heard anger from all sides. I learned of some of the institutional blockades to collecting back child support, the workplace pay differentials, the sexually abusive high school coaches who had townspeople on their side because they coached local teams to wins. I saw the stigma women often faced for speaking out.

## The unlikely path to Iowa

BACK IN INDIA in the 1960s, a palm reader shook his head and clucked while looking at the line on my hand associated with ambition. He saw none: a successful marriage, two fine children but no substantial earnings — most likely linked to my complete absence of goals.

He was right, at least for that moment. A diffident, rebellious kid uncertain of her role in a family of accomplished people, and of her identity in two different cultures, I dryly called myself an "international misfit." In India I stood out as too American. Back in New York, I was too Indian. The one career path I was drawn to — acting — was mostly off-limits, as there were no roles for someone who looked and sounded like me. What I most cared about, learned from travels and talks with the family, was social justice. But as a foreign student attending the United Nations school, I was a guest of the U.S. government and forbidden from protesting the Vietnam War or marching for civil rights.

My colleague and friend Courtney Crowder beautifully summarized the unlikely confluence of events that led me to Iowa as an opinion writer in 1991. By then, driven to write advocacy pieces about marginalized people, I'd dabbled in the alternative press, gotten a master's in journalism and worked as a reporter at several daily upstate New York papers. I'd married, Rob Borsellino, the editor of the first one. As a reporter, I had to work almost as hard at editing out my opinions. But after my last reporting job ended when the paper went under, I returned to doing what I loved: writing opinions for the alternative press. And as karma would have it, I was recruited by the daily Schenectady Gazette in my ninth month of pregnancy to be an editorial writer.



Romen Borsellino, left, Raj Borsellino and Aadithi Padmanabhan, Raj's future wife, put ornaments on a Christmas tree in 2017.

## Time after time in this job, I've had to challenge myself to look deeper, ask different questions of people involved, and remain open to changing my mind.

Less than two years later, the Des Moines Register made national news by winning a public service Pulitzer Prize for giving voice to a rape survivor. Then a chance meeting with the paper's opinion editor, Dennis Ryerson, at a national conference solidified my admiration for its editorial stances. So the following year, when I spotted a job opening there for an editorial writer, I jumped on it.

I moved here with two sons, expecting to stay at most two years. There was no job here for my husband at the time, and anyway, I wasn't used to staying places more than two years. One of the boys was still in diapers; the other in kindergarten. So when a Realtor I'd enlisted to find me a rental recommended I buy property in the Roosevelt High School area so my kids could go to high school there, I laughed. We'd be long gone by then, I said.

I ended up not just attending Raj's and Romen's Roosevelt graduations, but being the guest speaker for both of them. I also wound up addressing the 2008 graduating class at Grinnell College, where a ceremonial scarf was draped around my shoulders as an honorary doctorate recipient.

I've outlasted seven Register publishers. In my time here, I became a naturalized U.S. citizen, lost my husband to ALS, saw my older son, Raj, get married and, last year, become a father. In that time my younger son, Romen, transitioned from a job in the Obama White House to being a comedy writer in Los Angeles.

Because of this job, I got to interview Edna Griffin, Sister Helen Prejean, Gloria Steinem, Afghanistan's female activist "Zoya," Temple Grandin, Maya Angelou, Michelle Obama, Bernie Sanders, Hillary and Bill Clinton, Elizabeth Edwards, Mia Farrow, Julie Andrews and Bette Midler. And to be interviewed by Rachel Maddow, Don Lemon and Tom Brokaw, among others. I shared a hot tub with Molly Ivins at a women's writers retreat, and a hug with Gabby Giffords in a downtown Des Moines coffee shop. I hung out with openly gay Crown Prince Manvendra Singh Gohil of India after Nate Monson, who led an Iowa organization for gay youth, asked me to moderate his visit to Des Moines. I gave author Carl Bernstein my garage door code when he called one evening wanting to meet to pitch me on his new book about Hillary Clinton. So by the time I got home with friends I'd been out dining with, he was already settled in, having a drink.

## Steps backward and forward, and what comes next

SADLY, SOME THEMES to my columns have persisted, involving the mistreatment of African Americans, immigrants (predominantly Muslim) and the LGBTQ community (predominantly transgender). Moving here in '91, I was struck by the degree to which gay and lesbian people felt unsafe coming out, in part because of the absence of civil rights protections based on sexual orientation. That finally changed with an addition to state law in 2007.

But before that, 12-year Des Moines school board member Jonathan Wilson was voted out when it became known he was gay. And nine years after that, in 2004, the state Senate's GOP majority blocked Wilson's appointment to the Iowa Board of Education, explicitly for

the same reason. Said Republican Sen. Ken Veenstra, "This ... is the wish of God-fearing people that insist on basing their values on a divine law rather than a misguided culture that man has created."

As recently as 2003, a popular local talk-radio host was regularly calling a school's Straight and Gay Alliance the "sodomy club" and a gay person a "pervert," and chiding the school for pushing sexual activity and homosexuality by allowing such clubs. And even though Iowa got same-sex marriage in 2009, the Legislature and governor continue to rally constituents using false fears over LGBTQ-affirming books at school and transgender people's bathroom use or choice of sports teams. Also triggering controversy and parental protests has been the supposed teaching of critical race theory and the 1619 Project.

One of my proudest moments as an Iowan was seeing America's first Black president get his first nod in the 2007 Iowa caucuses. I'd hoped Hillary Clinton would run and win four years earlier. But almost by accident I got to hear Obama address 18,000 people at Hy-Vee Hall and instantly knew he was the one. I'd already met and talked to him at editorial board meetings. But never before had I witnessed so viscerally the commanding charisma he showed or the ability to inspire people to dream bigger.

So after the Register officially endorsed Clinton, I weighed in for Obama, describing him as "that rarest of leaders, combining roots in white Midwestern America with black Africa, and experience both organizing in barrios and editing the Harvard Law Review." As I wrote, "It was as if no one could quite believe this youthful but commanding man, who spoke their language and echoed their dreams, might actually run America."

The day the piece came out, Michelle Obama, with whom I'd had coffee, called me elated, saying she'd just gotten off a plane when someone handed her my piece. Iowans started writing me to say the column had persuaded them to vote for Obama. And on the day of the New Hampshire primary, which followed Iowa, Obama himself called my house and left a voicemail thanking me for the column, and saying he thought it helped him.

Things like that could happen only in Iowa, I would tell friends elsewhere. Now Iowa Democrats apparently no longer have the first-in-the-nation caucuses, and Iowa opinion writers may never again have that power.

My own career trajectory has been notable for its lack of long-term planning, and for being motivated more by emotion and impulse than by the prospect of money or power. Yet I leave feeling empowered by all the things I was able to do here. I hope my unlikely path will encourage some young person uncertain of their goals in life to worry less, and be guided more by their passions: Harness that anger, outrage, alienation and grief into a career path. Use the sensitivity you may have been teased about as a strength. Take risks to do what you love.

Today, as I leave this job, I think back to what that palmist said about my lack of ambition and am finally able to declare him wrong. I did lack a career path back then, or at least the imagination to picture a future. I was uncertain of my place in this complicated world. But what some call ambition or career drive might really just be indignation that spills over into constructive callings. Those things can embolden us and give us purpose and drive.

And finally: With each big life event, people ask if I'll be leaving Iowa. Once again I don't know what the future looks like. I hope to keep writing and speaking out in some form, maybe through another medium like radio or TV. But I know this much: Des Moines is still home. And whatever else changes at this paper I've devoted myself to, it still has important truths to tell, and talented people to tell them, so I hope you'll keep reading it.



Rekha Basu shares her story during the Des Moines Storytellers Project on Oct. 3, 2017, at Noce in Des Moines. Basu has shared her stories and coached storytellers for the Storytellers Project. BRYON HOULGRAVE/REGISTER FILE PHOTO