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**Connie Watts,
Executive Director
of Equal Rights Washington**

PHOTO BY MALCOLM SMITH

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Watt's Energizes Washington's Rights Fight

Story by Lisa Walls
Photos by Malcolm Smith

She was only a toddler when Andy Warhol's aphoristic quote, "Everyone will be famous for 15 minutes," became an iconic part of America's pop lexicon; but before she had even graduated from high school, Connie Watts proved his proclamation true. As a teenager, Watts made headlines in her hometown of Orem, Utah, when she and a friend were threatened with a lawsuit by a former state attorney general and the ultra-conservative Eagle Forum. Their offense?

The two high school seniors had written a story on teen pregnancy. "Five of the school's seven cheerleaders were too pregnant to finish the cheer season," said Watts. During the 1983-1984 school year, Watts was editor in chief of the student newspaper. She and another editor wrote about possible solutions to the problem of teen pregnancy. They suggested that students could drive 45 minutes up the highway, to the Planned Parenthood clinic in Salt Lake City. "We were called into the principal's office within a day or two of the edition being distributed.



Connie Watts of Equal Rights Washington

We learned we were being sued for promoting sex to youth," said Watts. Almost immediately, the lawsuit became above-the-fold news across Utah. (At the time of the imbroglio, a similar Missouri case that involved the journalistic rights of high school students was brewing. Those young writers had also reported on teen pregnancy. That case was eventually heard by the U.S. Supreme Court.)

"There were a couple of weeks of intense discussion between us and our advisors. The lawsuit was finally withdrawn," she said. "I didn't understand why the subject was so controversial; for them, it was writing about teen pregnancy that was the problem, not the pregnant cheerleaders. The experience opened my eyes to the world of politics." Watts was recognized for her work by the Society of Professional Journalists, who gave her a Sigma Delta Chi award for excellence in journalism.

The controversial organization Watts mentioned in her article would later figure in her career. From 1991 through 2006, Watts drew a paycheck from Planned Parenthood. She worked her way up the organizational ladder, gaining kudos along the way, before being tapped to become the national field director in Washington, D.C. Watts was a key organizer for the 2004 March for Women's Lives, an achievement she considers the pinnacle of her career thus far.

"It was the largest march in the history of the country—it brought 1.2 million people to D.C." She held the position for seven years, leaving after she felt ready for another professional challenge. Now, only a few months after taking the helm as the new executive director for Equal Rights Washington (ERW), she reports, "I'm energized to come to work every day and I love the people I work with."

“Her magic is in her ability to...develop consensus among individuals and organizations that have different needs and priorities.”

The feeling is mutual. Bethany Coleman, development coordinator, described Watts as “fun, fresh, and feisty.” “We have a lot of fun in the office,” she said.

She’s tenacious and focused, but still warm, generous, and giving,” offered Field Organizer Nathan Riding.

Joshua Friedes, ERW’s advocacy director, echoed his colleagues’ sentiments: “Her magic is in her ability to listen, creatively solve problems, and develop consensus among individuals and organizations that have different needs and priorities. Her silver bullets are her humor, warmth, and intelligence. It’s unusual to meet a person who has both great people skills and a keen political strategic sense.”

After so many years with Planned Parenthood, Watts appreciates the opportunity to work for her own community, and is “impressed by the collaboration that goes on.”

“Some people think there’s tension and conflict in Seattle’s LGBT community,” Watts said. “But coming from D.C., I’m a bit cynical. I’ve been mightily impressed by the cooperation I’ve seen. I think tension is normal.”

When asked about current challenges she’s facing as ERW’s leader, she said, “I’m surprised by the feeling of apathy in the community—not among organizational leadership, but with some of the people. When you’re in the comfort zone of a large city, you can forget about what’s at stake. Seattle is a progressive place, and I worry because we have to remember we have a long way to go to secure the rights we need and deserve.”

Connie Watts stands just 5’ 1” without heels. Despite her small frame, and the jewelry, perfume, makeup, and delicate clothing, it’s not hard to picture her rolling up her sleeves and buckling on a tool belt to complete a task.

“ERW is still in its infancy. I want to move it to a place where it’s well established,” she said. The new executive director is clear on how she will achieve that goal. “It’s important to keep focused. It’s easy to get into a situation and mission creep—take on more than you have capacity for. You get away from your core mission. You have to have goals that match resource size. Too often, we have organizations with lofty goals and not enough resources; it causes apathy. Focus is important, and it’s a trick because it means you have to be good at juggling relationships and demands. People are always bringing ideas to us; you have to know how to say yes to some, but then also recognize how you’re already doing things that help others’ causes, and point it out to them.”



As a leader, Watts says, “I try to bring lots of energy into the environments I’m in. We’re all really busy, and energy helps you work creatively and get projects done. If you’re tired, it’s hard to get creative.” To help her staff deal with their demanding workload, she is a strong advocate for work/life balance. “As a manager you have to encourage healthy work hours. In D.C., it was a badge of honor to work until 8 or 9 p.m. I encourage people to be efficient during their workday and take down time when they need it. I’m insistent on it.”

Lisa Walls works as a contract writer and editor in Seattle. She lives on Capitol Hill.