

The Burlington, VT Branch Hosts Carolyn Raffensperger

By Cheryl Diersch

Carolyn Raffensperger took Burlington, Vermont by storm this week, from April 7-11. She spoke to Quakers and WILPF members at a welcoming dinner, and, over the following three days, to two colleges, a gathering of legislators at the State House, a group of ecological economists at the University of Vermont, the sustainable staff of CEDO: (Community and Economic Development Office) in City Hall and the mayor himself!

We, Burlington WILPF women, are so impressed with the depth of Carolyn's wisdom, knowledge, and foresight. Ms. Raffensperger promotes an emerging ethical rationale and structure that challenges most of our environmental threats. Economist and Professor Josh Farley of the Gund Institute said, "Carolyn's proposal is unique because it has an ethical structure for all governments to become involved." You may watch her Ted Talk [here](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wHYKBnl-Kw&feature=youtu.be): <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wHYKBnl-Kw&feature=youtu.be> and her **Earth Democracy Conference talk** <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UdQgPFrdEns> at the Democracy Convention in Madison, WI, mid-August 2013.

Many of you who are associated with WILPF know Attorney Carolyn Raffensperger's message, that future generations have rights and responsibilities, too. As you know, all communication channels for citizens' voices are positioned under protecting "property rights". At present, property and permits trump protecting our Commons: water, air, lakes and forests, public buildings, etc. Permits are property, and this creates the impossible when we want to protect against fracking permits, pipelines, extractions of our water table for corporate profit and mining rights.

Attorney Raffensperger begins her talk by saying: "It is our responsibility to leave this planet in good shape. Therefore, present generations have a responsibility to protect the rights of future generations to inherit a livable planet. Future generations include nature and all of her creatures."

Attorney Raffensperger's proposal, a guardian of future generations, is premised on the idea that government has two key roles. "The first is to serve as the trustee or steward of the commons for present and future generations. Second, government has responsibility for protecting rights. Few rights are as important as that of a clean and healthy environment. By making these roles explicit, government bodies have a rationale for structuring budgets. The budget should be tied to the commons under its jurisdiction. The argument isn't whether government should be big or small but whether it can fulfill its responsibilities to care for the commonwealth and common health."

Attorney Raffensperger continues to outline the key role of government. "Government has a particularly important role in planning for a difficult future since it can leverage collaborative efforts that prevent harms and mitigate difficulties. A key way to take

responsibility for future generations is to designate, appoint, or elect a guardian of future generations. While the exact title doesn't matter, what is important is to charge someone with the duty to care for future generations and provide the tools to carry out that duty. She has carefully researched and detailed these tools in her publications.

What's more, Carolyn lectures about the idea of free, prior and informed consent to establish community rights to transform environmental and public health decision-making. "The idea of free, prior and informed consent is deeply embedded in the science and research establishment. No experiments can be undertaken on a human subject without their free, prior and informed consent. This right is being extended to communities as a matter of international law. Communities have a right to give or withhold their consent to extractive or polluting industries. The idea that government obtains its legitimacy from the consent of the governed is deeply embedded in US political theory, beginning with the Declaration of Independence. Imagine creating new institutions and mechanisms for communities to exercise their right to free, prior and informed consent".

Correspondingly, Carolyn says, "Burlington is uniquely situated to innovate solutions to the challenges ahead. It has a constellation of resources that allow it to be a leader in sustainability. Other nations have tried some experiments to protect the rights of future generations. The United Nations is currently considering some pro-active approaches to future generations."

This local Burlington WILPF Earth Democracy group plans to continue to work with Carolyn and follow up with the various politicians and city staff. We will meet next week to put together our own statewide plan to go forward. We highly recommend our WILPF sisters in other cities to sponsor your own Earth Democracy, Attorney Raffensperger tour. She has a doable and achievable perspective that is extremely thoughtful and legitimate too! Thank you WILPF Mini Grants for your support and the WILPF Earth Democracy group's leadership that gave Burlington and Vermont a kick start to be a leader in new sustainability policies. You can watch her taped presentation at the University of Vermont, Gund Institute **here**: <http://www.cctv.org/watch-tv/programs/guardianship-future-generations-becoming-great-ancestors>

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