

She stood up



Kristi LaCroix challenged the teachers unions, faced withering attacks and then triumphed

In the beginning, Kristi LaCroix just wanted to be a schoolteacher.

She grew up in Kenosha, went to Carthage College in Kenosha and all the while just wanted to teach.

But she was politically conservative. Even growing up in pro-union Kenosha, even while her father headed the police union before becoming chief,

Kristi LaCroix believed in conservative principles like smaller government, less regulation, lower taxes and keeping politics out of the classroom.

She couldn't foresee the collision between her political ideals and chosen profession. She never imagined the flood of hate mail that would eventually land in her inbox. She was surprised when she was shouted down at the National

Education Association's 2008 convention and told, "Go home!" and "You're not welcome here."

But the now-former Kenosha teacher says she doesn't regret what she did at all.

LaCroix, 39, is perhaps best known throughout Wisconsin for appearing in a political ad for Gov. Scott Walker during the 2012 recall campaign. But her fight with teachers unions at the local, state and national levels actually started about 10 years earlier.

LaCroix says she'd been teaching for four or five years — she is licensed to teach grades six through high school, and specializes in at-risk children — when she really started noticing "what was going on with my paycheck."

"I was paying \$110 a month to the union and watching them spend millions on politics that I didn't agree with," she says.

Her co-teacher was president of the local union, the Kenosha Education Association, and he encouraged her to get involved — to fight the system "from within."

So she did. She served on state committees for the Wisconsin Education Association Council and was a four-time delegate to the National Education Association's national meeting.

Just how liberal is the NEA, the nation's largest labor union? It has never supported a Republican presidential candidate, and according to federal campaign finance documents, gave 95% of its multi-million-dollar political war chest in 2012 to Democrats. At this year's convention, members voted to demand U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan's resignation because of remarks he made in support of a California initiative to get rid of incompetent teachers.

By the 2008 convention, LaCroix says, she and other conservative teachers realized that working "from within" simply wasn't realistic.

And she had already begun the process of becoming a "fair share" member of the Kenosha Education Association, WEAC and the NEA — in effect, demanding that the local, state and national

unions return that portion of her dues spent on political activity, her right under federal law.

But getting the unions to comply was the equivalent of running a steeplechase, she says, jumping through hoops and vaulting over fences of confusing and duplicative paperwork. The unions didn't comply, she says, until she hired an attorney.

"And in the end," she says, "they claimed that 98.7% of my dues money was going toward 'administrative costs' and collective bargaining — that of my \$110 a month, I was entitled to get back \$2!"

LaCroix says she believes the teachers unions spend substantially more than that on politics, a

'I was paying \$110 a month to the union and watching them spend millions on politics that I didn't agree with.'

belief that was bolstered when she finally got a refund check for more than \$700.

"Teachers are just being lied to by their own unions over and over again," she says.

And then, in 2011, came Act 10: Gov. Walker's successful plan to virtually eliminate collective bargaining for public employees in Wisconsin — including teachers.

The howls of outrage were heard around the world, including in blue-collar Kenosha.

"I kept hearing people say 'my constitutional right to collectively bargain.' They said that so many times, people started believing it was true. But it's not. The state Supreme Court just said it isn't, but people still think that it is. I think it's going to take another generation to move past that," LaCroix says.

And it may take teachers even longer, she adds. "Teachers unions are a breed of their own. They're so far off the path of other unions" in their intent to set the United States on a more liberal pathway, she says.

Act 10 prompted outraged public employees and their liberal allies to force a series of recall elections in 2012, including an attempt to get rid of Walker.

Republicans began looking for people who could assure voters that the sky was not falling — or at least, that the ceiling tiles in their local public schools were not crashing to the floor — because of Act 10. One of two public school teachers willing to pick up the fight was LaCroix.

For her, the consequences of agreeing to appear in that ad were “horrible.”

Fellow teachers and other outraged “blue-fisters” bore down with a vengeance, piling on the abuse.

‘I got spat on in the cereal aisle at Pick ’n Save by a fellow teacher.’

“My husband got an e-mail that said, ‘I hope you know where every abandoned road in Kenosha County is, because that’s where you’re going to find your wife’s body,’” LaCroix says.

“My superintendent was getting tons of e-mails from people saying, ‘You have to get rid of her; she’s a disgusting human being.’ But the superintendent was behind me all the way.

“I got spat on in the cereal aisle at Pick ’n Save by a fellow teacher. At a teacher in-service meeting, another teacher singled me out and started yelling at me, mocking me and laughing at me.... I just quietly gathered my stuff and left.

“But afterwards, other teachers came up and said, ‘We’re really sorry about that,’ and I thought, ‘Why didn’t you say something?’ Maybe if there’d been five of us willing to stand up for what we believe in...”

Opponents also went to the “Rate My Teacher” website and loaded her file with so many negative reviews, website administrators had to step in and remove the obviously false ones, she says.

“But for every negative e-mail I got, there were two positive ones, even from other teachers, saying, ‘Thank

you. I wish I was brave enough to stand up like you.’ I wish they were, too.”

Her efforts did not go unnoticed elsewhere.

In 2012, she received the National Right to Work Legal Defense Foundation’s Carol Applegate Award.

While the verbal and written abuse were apparently intended to make her sit down and shut up, they had the opposite effect.

She noticed that despite Act 10, which forbade school districts from subtracting union dues from public employees’ paychecks, the Kenosha District was still doing just that.

So she complained — and got nowhere. She started investigating the School Board, a majority of whose members were firmly in the teachers union’s corner.

She photographed a secret meeting, in a restaurant, between four board members — an illegal quorum. She documented another secret meeting, between a KEA representative and the assistant school superintendent while the superintendent was out of town.

Eventually, the pro-union board members forced out the superintendent and convinced the School Board to enact a new contract with the KEA, in total defiance of Act 10.

LaCroix then took her case to the Wisconsin Institute for Law & Liberty.

LaCroix photographed a secret meeting in a restaurant of four Kenosha School Board members.

“We started the lawsuit, but she did, too,” says Rick Esenberg, founder of the institute and an adjunct professor of law at Marquette University.

“In order to bring public policy litigation, we needed a plaintiff — a taxpayer who lived in the district — and that was Kristi,” added Esenberg, who is also

a columnist for *Wisconsin Interest* and other news outlets.

A year ago, the institute and the National Right to Work Legal Defense Foundation sued the Kenosha Unified School District (the third largest district in the state behind Milwaukee and Madison), the School Board and the KEA for violating Act 10.



Six months later, the defendants caved. The settlement calls on the district, the board and the union to pay all of the Wisconsin Institute for Law & Liberty's legal fees, and more importantly, nullifies the contract between the district and the KEA.

LaCroix had not been sitting still while the lawsuit percolated. She helped enlist a new slate of candidates for the Kenosha School Board, including her ex-police chief father, Dan Wade.

And despite being outspent 6 to 1, LaCroix says, the pro-Act 10 slate was elected last spring.

Esenberg has nothing but praise for LaCroix.

"Kenosha is a union town, and it's not unlike Madison. Kristi attracted a lot of vitriol. She did have a lot of abuse heaped on her, but she was still willing to stand up and be the plaintiff," he says. (Esenberg subsequently filed a similar suit against the Madison school district on behalf of David Blaska, the conservative blogger. The suit alleges that the district's contract with Madison Teachers Inc. violates Act 10.)

The conflict did take a toll on LaCroix, who stepped down in 2013 after 15 years of teaching to become the regional membership director of the Association of American Educators.

The AAE describes itself as "the largest nonunion, professional educators' organization" in the country, and while it has just one-tenth as many members as the NEA, LaCroix says it's growing quickly.

'Teachers are just being lied to by their own unions over and over again.'

"Especially since the state Supreme Court upheld Act 10, I've been getting daily requests for information," she says. "Unlike the NEA, the AAE is more concerned with supporting teachers in the classroom. They don't do politics."

And, in the end, LaCroix is sure about one thing: "I will return to the classroom someday. I love teaching. I love the students. I can't imagine never walking into a classroom again."

She's also pretty certain that everything she has done and endured has made a difference. "I'm not creating tsunamis, but I'm making waves," she says. "You'll never open a history book and read about me, but I do think I'm making a difference.

"And I'll never give up. I'll still be causing trouble when I'm 80," LaCroix says, laughing. ■

Sunny Schubert is a Monona freelance writer and former editorial writer for the Wisconsin State Journal.