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Heroes to inspire Northern Nevada in 2021 | Sheila Leslie

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This opinion column was submitted by RGJ columnist Sheila Leslie, who served in the Nevada Legislature from 1998 to 2012.

Much of 2020 has been grim and depressing, but these waning days bring glimmers of hope in the form of vaccines and a new national leader who will appoint government officials more interested in serving us than themselves. We can certainly celebrate having made it through these last four years even though our democracy is limping along, with far too many still blindly following a delusional and selfish man.

But let's leave the travails of 2020 behind for now and recognize a few people who quietly serve our community without a fancy title or expectation of recognition. Unlike many of our elected officials who spend inordinate amounts of time praising each other for minor deeds, these Nevada heroes selflessly work to improve our community without the need of public approbation.

Earstin Whitten co-founded the nonprofit agency Soulful Seeds several years ago with his wife, Dee. He's a gentle, unassuming man who grew up as one of 15 children in a poor sharecropping family in Arkansas. Now in retirement, he has dedicated himself to working the soil in a small downtown urban garden, teaching others how to cultivate produce, and setting the example by donating the fruits of their labor to those struggling to put healthy food on the table.

More: He grew up a sharecropper, now Soulful Seeds founder feeds the community

Whitten has a vision for Reno's future that features neighborhood gardens, a two-acre farm on the Northern Nevada Adult Mental Health Services campus, and a farm stand to sell excess produce benefiting Soulful Seeds so they can start the whole food production and distribution cycle again each year. As more families struggle with food insecurity during these difficult

times, Soulful Seeds hopes to expand its work through a Share the Harvest program and more community involvement.

Dr. Alicia Barber is a local historian, urbanist and author who has been particularly active in historical preservation efforts which all too often have been stymied by Reno's incessant demand for more tax revenue at the expense of honoring its past. She pays close attention to local and regional government, alerting residents to schemes such as the gutting of Reno's skyway ordinance so UNR can build in the vaunted gateway entrance and not have to answer to the Design Review Committee. She also ferreted out the details of a 20-ton "Charters of Freedom" monument approved by the Washoe County Commission at the historic courthouse in downtown Reno. The monument is part of a nationwide push by an ultra-conservative North Carolina businessman and would-be congressman who took part in the "birther" movement against President Obama. The monument contains seriously inaccurate information about the Bill of Rights to the point of being dubbed the Bill of Wrongs in other communities. Its placement on the courthouse lawn has been derailed, at least for now, in large part by Barber's efforts.

Opinion: UNR's plan to build a skyway over Ninth Street needs more scrutiny from Reno

In 2021, Barber is launching a new "new multi-pronged initiative" to promote greater citizen participation in issues and decisions related to Reno's development. She fiercely believes in civic engagement and citizen awareness of the activities of local government and offers her research and analysis to the community through social media and a free newsletter, the Barber Brief. Subscribe at thebarberbrief.substack.com.

Patrick Donnelly is the Nevada state director of the Center for Biological Diversity, an environmental advocacy organization that recently led a coalition to convince Congress to deny the Defense Department's plans to seize 1.7 million acres of Nevada's public land for more bombing ranges. His willingness to take a firm stand for environmental justice is refreshing, especially when compared to some of Nevada's other conservation groups who seem allergic to confrontation.

Donnelly is also leading the battle to save an endangered flower from extinction, by suing for protection under the Endangered Species Act. Tiehm's buckwheat is only found on 21 acres of public land deep in the remote Silver Peak Range in Esmeralda County where an Australian company wants to mine for lithium and boron. Nearly 40 percent of the known population of the rare wildflower was destroyed recently; the mining company blames rodents for the damage but Donnelly says that's a stretch.

“Basically, they’ve proven that one time, at some point, some ground squirrel ate a buckwheat. What they did not prove was that literally hundreds of ground squirrels simultaneously decided to switch their dietary preferences to Tiehm’s buckwheat and wipe half the species off the face of the Earth in a couple of weeks.”

Before he leaves office, Trump is determined to give the company an unassailable green light to mine. The fate of the humble buckwheat will rest largely, and unfairly, on the efforts of Donnelly and his group to pull out another win for Nevadans.

It’s easy to become cynical about ineffective government and corporate greed but these tireless heroes and others like them can reinspire us in 2021.

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