

# CINNABAR FOUNDATION

## ROBIN TAWNEY NICHOLS AND GORDON “CORKY” BRITTAN JOIN RANKS OF EMERITUS DIRECTORS

It’s no coincidence that both Robin Tawney Nichols and Gordon “Corky” Brittan were fresh off a special dedication ceremony when I spoke with them for this article. The dedication was for the “Jim Posewitz Free River Fishing Access Site” on the Yellowstone River, just south of Livingston—exactly where developers planned to build Allenspur Dam, a major impoundment that would provide water to cool 42 proposed coal-fired power plants in eastern Montana and Wyoming. Over seven years, Jim Posewitz (Poz), one of Cinnabar’s founders, led the effort to successfully prevent damming the river by gathering data that justified reserving in-stream flows for the life-cycle needs of fish and wildlife.

Both Robin and Corky recently “retired” from the Cinnabar Foundation board and assumed new roles as emeritus board members. Robin served 28 years, 25 as board president. Corky served 12 years, two as president.



Robin and her Morgan named Excel

The Cinnabar Foundation has played a significant role in Robin’s life since its beginning in 1983. Her late husband, Phil Tawney, was one of Cinnabar’s founders, along with Leonard and Sandy Sargent and Jim Posewitz. Upon Phil’s death in 1995, Len Sargent asked Robin to join the board to fill his position. In Robin’s words, “It was an easy ‘yes.’” Little did she know that Len would die unexpectedly two years later, and she would be tapped to become board president.

Corky met Cinnabar’s founders when they and many others joined forces in the 1970s to stop the Allenspur Dam. At the same time, Robin wrote extensive articles exposing the folly of damming the longest free-flowing river in the lower 48 to flood the Paradise Valley on the northern edge of Yellowstone National Park. In 2012, Robin asked Corky to join the Cinnabar board upon his retirement from the Wheeler Center at Montana State University. For Corky, being asked to serve on the board also was an easy “yes.”

Turns out that “Poz” — boldly risking his job as a state employee to speak out in defense of rivers, wildlife and wild places — was a mentor to both Corky and Robin.

I asked Robin and Corky a series of questions and I was struck by the similarities in their answers.

Regarding her accomplishments on the board, Robin stated that “Cinnabar has helped so many groups do good and, importantly, diverse work.” Robin also shared a sense of pride in seeing Cinnabar become “professionalized” from its “casual, really casual” beginnings back in 1983, to a well-honed organization with two staff. “We’re set up for the future, letting good people do good work.”

Both Robin and Corky emphasized that Cinnabar has played an important role in providing seed money to help organizations get off the ground.

Corky mentioned that many of Cinnabar’s grantees have made great strides over the years. He also pointed out Cinnabar’s role in bringing together the Montana Conservation Funders, an alliance of 20 foundations that support conservation work in Montana. The Funders first met at the Brittan ranch and have been meeting regularly for three years.



Corky Brittan

On the subject of challenges facing the conservation community, both Robin and Corky decried the recent assault on the Montana Constitution and the state legislature’s often successful attempts to undermine or reverse the landmark legislative achievements of the 1970s, including the Montana Environmental Protection Act, the Major Facility Siting Act, the Strip Mine and Hard Rock Mining reclamation acts, Coal Conservation Act, Water Use Act, and Subdivision and Platting Act. Corky and Robin agreed that the 1970s were “the high-water mark in Montana’s conservation history.” “It was inspiring and exciting to watch it take place,” Corky said. “Montana led the country in our environmental legislation, and now it’s being pulled apart.”

When asked what gives them hope, their responses were, once again, aligned.

Robin said, “Cinnabar has a big role to play because it’s a Montana foundation run by Montanans. We know the issues, the organizations, and how to build relationships. Again, it’s about people.”

Both Robin and Corky mentioned being optimistic about the many young, great leaders in the conservation community, especially those at the helm of several nonprofits and those involved in young voter movements and climate change.

Corky stated that Cinnabar, as a relatively small foundation, has made a bigger difference than resources would've forecast. "It's been a terrific honor to serve on the board and I've been so proud of what we've accomplished... Cinnabar has tried to be as close to the organizations and people as possible, to learn as much as we possibly can, so that we can make informed decisions."

Incoming Board President Grant Parker said, "It is humbling to follow Robin as the Cinnabar Foundation President, and her 25 years of excellent service in that position. Robin is a good friend and an inspiration for those working to conserve our natural resources, and in supporting the people and organizations who do so much for Montana and the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem."

Judi Stauffer, long-time Cinnabar board member stated, "Corky's knowledge and passion for conservation, Montana and the Great Yellowstone Ecosystem have indelibly enriched Cinnabar's work. I have learned so much from him over the years, and I am delighted that both Corky and Robin will remain active as emeritus directors."

The Cinnabar Foundation Board of Directors and staff will miss Robin and Corky's thoughtful insights and the tremendous legacy that they brought to the organization. Cheers and many thanks ... we'll see you "down the trail!"

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