

Civility Difficult To Find In Aftermath Of Olson's & Wilson's 2024 Election To The Redlands School Board

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By John Berry

Never in my two decades in the newspaper business have I ever seen elected officials so viciously attacked as three members of the Redlands school board.

I don't say that lightly. In my reporting days in Florida and California, I've covered multiple levels of elected officials, from fire and community college district trustees to county commissioners and state legislators.

A group calling itself Together For Redlands spearheads vicious and vile attacks on Redlands Unified School District board members Candy Olson, Jeannette Wilson, and Michele Rendler. At meetings, needlessly lasting past midnight, numerous Together For Redlands supporters would typically call the trio "Nazis," "fascists" and "white Christian nationalists."

And that's just for starters. Often, attackers – including current and former Redlands students – would flip middle fingers and drop F-bombs as well as scream primal profanity at the board. Police escorted the worst out of the meeting. The protesters were undaunted. They picketed and leafleted Rendler at her church.

Further, the Ark Church in Redlands – the members of which and pastor actively support Olson and Wilson – was singled out for vitriol.

Violence and vandalism targeting the church and its members are nothing new. The latest attack took place in April when, after a particularly contentious school board meeting, swastikas suddenly appeared on Ark Church signage. Local, regional and state media covered the crime, and the FBI questioned suspects. No arrests were made, but vandalism has since ceased.

Olson, a married mother of five, was Together's prime target. Supporters attacked her nursing license as well as her employer. One foul-mouthed youngster said Olson's mother "should have had an abortion."

The goal of Together appears to be intimidating and bullying, whether in person or via social media, the trio and their supporters into acquiescing to politically unpopular positions such as promoting transgenderism among students, pushing sexually explicit material into district libraries, and flying homosexual pride flags in classrooms.

To push its messaging, Together For Redlands supporters arrived with preprinted signs and coordinated attack themes. Its members and acolytes filled the school board room as well as populating waiting lines dozens of people long. They vastly outnumbered Olson and Wilson supporters or those of no particular political stripe who had come merely to watch the meetings.

Together For Redlands members might have curtailed their behavior had the local news media reported heated meetings accurately. Instead, reporters glossed over Together's behavior and

dutifully published defamatory stories – reporting so subjective that I'm doubting whether responsible editors ever intervened between writing and publication.

Because no responsible adults seem to populate local media anymore, I dusted-off and donned my newspaper fedora and researched local and state public records involving Together For Redlands, its officers, and key supporters.

The revelations were stunning.

The Issues

In 2009, my last year as a reporter for the *Press-Enterprise*, I could walk into Redlands school board meetings anytime and get a seat among dozens of empty chairs. Meetings were agitation-free and downright boring.

In 2020, COVID and masking policies prompted parents to start filling seats. After Olson and Wilson were elected in 2024, attendance exploded; immediately, people queued for hours in hopes of getting inside. Together turned queues into parties before and after meetings.

Attendance exploded as new policies emerged as lightning rods:

- Banning controversial and special interest flags, such as pride and Black Lives Matter, to create politically neutral classrooms. The policy did allow for flags such as the American and California flags.
- Improving the process with regard to how the public could review and object to controversial books – in particular books so sexually explicit I am not going to name them.
- Preventing sexually explicit and vulgar reading materials from reaching students in classrooms, curriculum, and libraries.

Those three passed. Another electrifying issue was stopping transgender athletes from joining teams of the opposite sex, which was passed as a resolution.

More than any other objectionable book, the adult novel, "The Push" caught the ire of Olson and Wilson as well as their supporters. Several graphic passages depict rape and incest as well as oral and vaginal sex with children. In one scene, the book explicitly details how a father rapes his infant daughter while his wife sleeps in the same bed.

That book is available to middle-aged teens in the libraries of Orangewood and Citrus Valley high schools.

Full disclosure: I am an active supporter of Olson and Wilson. I have knocked on doors and contributed to their campaigns. I advocate their positions at school board meetings.

Together For Redlands

According to California Secretary of State records, Together For Redlands is a California nonprofit mutual benefit corporation.

"Members join a nonprofit mutual benefit corporation to meet like-minded people and work toward an agreed upon goal, such as improving a community, completing a project, growing a sport, or just sharing interests," according to the legal Up Council website.

Together For Redlands filed a statement of information on January 22, 2025, listing its officers as:

- Samantha Trad, chief executive officer
- Kevin C. Dockham, chief financial officer
- Michael Paisner, secretary
- Trisha Keeling, executive director

As a California nonprofit/mutual benefit, Together For Redlands must file annual paperwork with the state and federal governments. In general, such nonprofits aren't required to start listing financial information until fundraising exceeds \$50,000.

In its articles of incorporation, Together For Redlands offers only a vague clue about its purpose, stating, "The specific purpose of this corporation is to promote civic awareness." The California Attorney General's Office publishes "Guide for Charities, Best practices for nonprofits that operate or fundraise in California." The book is specific in parts and vague in others. Such nonprofits are allowed to engage in politics, but the guide is unclear about what is allowable. "Examples of impermissible conduct include...engaging in certain prohibited political activities, such as participation in political campaigns on behalf of or in opposition to candidates for public office, or substantial lobbying," the manual states.

Together For Redlands supporters have advocated recalling Olson as well as holding fundraisers. "Help us raise funds to take back the school board in 2026," the group's September 3 flier asks.

As a California nonprofit mutual benefit, Together For Redlands isn't required to report to the attorney general's charity registry, which monitors donations for transparency and legitimacy.

I spent two weeks exchanging emails with the attorney general's office and the California Fair Political Practice Commission, the charter for which includes the "impartial interpretation and enforcement of political campaign, lobbying and conflict of interest laws." The responses from both agencies didn't clarify Together For Redlands' questionable status and conduct regarding whether it is a nonprofit corporation to "promote civic awareness" or whether it is a political organization, which would have more stringent reporting requirements.

Because of Together For Redlands' questionable activities, I am filing complaints with the attorney general and the FPPC. In addition, the AG website urges filers to also report their concerns to the IRS, the California Department of Consumer Affairs, and local police.

The School Board

Throughout Together For Redlands' prolonged assault on Olson, Wilson, and Rendler, the other two elected board members, Melissa Ayala-Quintero and Patty Holohan, played to an audience dominated by Together supporters.

When her supporters were present, Ayala-Quintero disputed nearly every board comment – even reaching incoherent and angry ramblings. On April 22, Superintendent Juan Cabral protected Olson by wedging himself between Ayala-Quintero and Olson. He faced Ayala-Quintero during the confrontation. The board censured Ayala-Quintero on May 13 for her verbal and physical threats. The confrontation occurred during public comment, when the camera focuses on the speaker, so the confrontation was not caught on video.

Holohan's comments opposing Olson and Wilson were brief. However, Holohan was also prone to hyperbole, for example, when she said the new flag policy could lead to student suicide.

"We're hurting a lot of our students by doing this, if they represent a certain flag, and especially our LGBTQ+ students," Holohan said in a Redlands *Community News* story. "When something goes wrong to them, you guys are going to get hit. When we have a student who commits suicide or attempts suicide, that's gonna be a lot to bear, and that hurts me."

Holohan boasts how she's been on the Redlands school board for 19 years – an era when the district reaped national attention for having at least 25 sexual predators within 20 years, according to the San Bernardino *Sun*. Settlements to students claiming sexual harassment totaled more than \$45 million, the paper said.

Cyber Bullying

Tricia Keeling is the executive director for Together For Redlands. Amber Easley, like Keeling, drops F-bombs at school board meetings. In 2024, they were "best friends," according to San Bernardino County Superior Court records.

Simultaneously, they also launched cyber-attacks and cyber bullying against the same person.

In October 2024, the target of their online harassment applied for a restraining order against the pair after their attacks caused the victim physical trauma. In court records, the victim referenced violations of the California penal codes relating to cyberstalking and cyberbullying by the duo.

"Trisha Keeling began contacting my husband on April 6, 2024, in an attempt to have him silence me from commenting about an activist group she belongs to, the members of which have been targeting and harassing others in our community, including political figures, business, and private citizens. She has not stopped since," the restraining order application stated.

The victim's allegation against Easley was similar.

"Amber Easley has paid to acquire personal and background [information] not publicly available," the woman wrote. "She has altered the information and images acquired. She has sent and posted these images via public social media and has encouraged members to harass, talk, and threaten us."

According to the victim's restraining order request:

"Trisha Keeling's persistent harassment threats and cyberstalking have caused conditions from my disability to worsen, causing panic attacks and episodes of intense fear triggering physical reactions, affecting my ability to function at work and home."

In her restraining order application, the victim alleged Easley's attacks also impacted her ability to function at home and work.

"Amber Easley's persistent harassment and cyberstalking of myself and my family have caused my autism to worsen, resulting in prolonged anxiety, panic attacks, and episodes of intense fear triggering physical reactions," the woman wrote in the restraining order petition.

The victim went to Redlands police, which advised obtaining restraining orders against both Keeling and Easley.

Disclosure: My experiences with Keeling lend credibility to the victim's allegations. At school board meetings, I spoke in favor of the new flag policy. Unexpectedly, I was the target of false and doctored social media accompanied with defamatory attacks unrelated to the flag policy. Afterward, I submitted an open records request to the Redlands school board. In return, I discovered a letter Keeling sent to the school board defaming me based on abject falsehoods unrelated to the flag policy.

In screenshots included in court records, Easley had an Instagram account with 8,000 followers named "eyerollsandbloodlust." In one post, Easley referred to the victim as, "watching a woman weaponize her disability as a human shield for (her husband) is big (f-word) oof."

"Oof" is a slang term signifying pain, surprise or dismay.

Also in court records, Keeling feigned victimhood while contradicting herself about engaging the victim in social media.

"While sharing factual information which appears in the public record is not prohibited by California law, I understood (the victim) was upset, and no other action was taken, except by her," Keeling wrote. "I asked her to please stop contacting me and told her it was unwelcome harassment."

Ultimately, both restraining orders reached the courtroom of San Bernardino County Superior Court Judge Ronald Gilbert. Judge Gilbert denied both.

The *Sentinel* agreed to refrain from identifying the woman who lodged the restraining order requests against Keeling and Easley by name. Her husband, Robb McDermott, spoke openly about the matter, allowing his identity to be disclosed.

"They were denied because it was a First Amendment conflict," Robb McDermott said. "The judge

would have enforced the orders on both of them had there been physical contact, not just cyber."

Easley has 17 entries in San Bernardino County court records. Three involve civil harassment.

Online records reflect the generalities of cases. To delve further into public records, reporters would need to go to the civil division, third floor, of the San Bernardino Justice Center, 347 West Third Street in San Bernardino.

The case number for Keeling is CIVSB2430701. Easley's is CIVSB2431126.

Together For Redlands Supporters

Keeling and Easley were by no means alone in their vulgarity at school board meetings. Many of their associates, other Together For Redlands members and like-minded supporters – including minors – screamed profanity at the board. Some claimed to be transgender.

Supporter Valerie Tabor ran for the Redlands school board to represent the district's Area 5, which covers much of eastern Redlands and most of Mentone, in 2024, ultimately losing to Olson by 830 votes. Tabor frequently attends school board meetings, advocating that the district's schools be more inclusive, and supportive of students, in particular those who are neurodiverse, LGBTQ+ or homeless.

Tabor's social media posts raised concerns among some in the Redlands community about her suitability for public office. Her Instagram post featured a red X over Rendler's face.

"Rendler needs to be voted out," Tabor's meme stated. "And in the meantime, she needs to be shunned. Don't acknowledge her. Don't greet her. Boo her. Make her uncomfortable and unwelcome in public spaces. At schools. At church. At any events."

On July 8, Tabor was removed from a meeting after shouting the f-word, the public video shows. Chairwoman Rendler cut her microphone. Tabor was escorted out while flipping her middle fingers. The audience applauded.

Soon after, I sent a video of Tabor's ejection to reporters while reminding them that they should save that clip in case Tabor again runs for office, as failed candidates often do. In my day, a former candidate being ejected from a public meeting would have been a newsworthy event in itself.

Fighting Back

In August, someone called Mass Resistance for help in opposing Together For Redlands.

According to its website, Mass Resistance is a "leading pro-family activist organization. Mass Resistance provides the information and guidance people need to confront assaults on the traditional family, school children, and the moral foundation of society."

And confront it did.

On August 6, Mass Resistance leader Arthur Schaper brought a video camera to Redlands and confronted Together For Redlands and its supporters. In his six-minute video, he aggressively challenged the waiting crowd to explain their positions.

None could. Instead, Schaper got the usual treatment of "Nazis" along with middle fingers and f-words.

Irresponsible Media

Redlands school meetings could have played out as normal government functions had reporters done their job.

In my reporting days, any group with as much notoriety and aggressiveness as Together For Redlands would have been placed under the media magnifying glass. That inspection is important because readers naturally grow skeptical and would want to know why one group is consuming so much media oxygen.

But the public never benefited from such research or objectivity. In effect, the media gave Together

For Redlands members a free pass to act like spoiled brats.

Their temper tantrums included name-calling with impunity, screaming without compunction, threats galore and supposedly rational-adults vomiting profanity and flashing middle fingers in ways which would scandalize their grandmothers.

The media's fawning coverage of Together included defaming Olson.

In July, Together For Redlands – via a mole inside her private Instagram account – associated Olson to an image of Hitler and Jesus published on Spicey Muzzled Memes. Olson said she liked a humorous image as part of a 20-image carousel. The controversial image was toward the end. In reality, Olson never saw the controversial image; regardless, the media dutifully reported the claim as part of a broadbrush smear.

A responsible editor would have spiked the story for basic fairness. To link any person, including elected officials and public figures, to Hitler without direct evidence is irresponsible and lazy reporting.

Even NBC glommed on to the story. The irony, Olson said, is that network's reporting was fairer than anything the local media wrote. She said the local media slants coverage against Awaken Redlands, whose members support Olson and Wilson.

"They do all these articles and give mentions to Together For Redlands. They just quoted Together

For Redlands line after line," Olson said. "They have called Awaken Redlands a 'far-right' group."

Like Together For Redlands, Awaken Redlands is a California nonprofit/mutual benefit corporation. It was formed in 2023. Unlike Together, Awaken's purpose statement provides specifics, delineating that "The specific purpose of this corporation is to focus on preserving traditional values in our community, to hold the school district board members, school administrators, and city council accountable as well as protecting the rights of teachers to keep their classrooms neutral and safe without fear of repercussions."

Epilogue

Together For Redlands has stopped attending board meetings en masse after repeated 3-to-2 votes, with Rendler, Wilson and Olson prevailing and Ayala-Quintero and Holohan dissenting, in which changes to district policy were effectuated. Those policy changes were made despite the fierce and vulgar opposition of Together For Redlands and their philosophical fellow travelers.

Now, meetings are relatively placid with a few holdouts injecting acerbic comments. Meetings are routine and conclude after a few hours.

Throughout the tumultuous meetings, Together For Redlands and their supporters kept doubling down on one failed tactic after another. Their bullying failed. Their threats failed. Their profanity succeeded only in hardening Wilson's and Olson's resolve and pushing Rendler into a more steadfast alliance with them. The trio did not buckle.

Rendler was the swing vote deciding controversial issues. She endlessly sought the middle ground in ways that needlessly prolonged meetings and infuriated supporters and opponents alike.

In retrospect, I suspect Rendler eventually committed to votes reflecting her values. But I could see how Together For Redlands, because of its repulsive behavior, may have lost Rendler's vote more than Olson and Wilson gained it.

Finally, narcissistic groups like Together For Redlands are more about dominating the public spotlight than the positions it supposedly supports. The recent absence of its members shows that these members may never have genuinely believed in the issues they spewed.

John Berry is an experienced newspaper reporter, including nine at The Press-Enterprise.

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