

# The Pueblo Chieftain

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## The right touch From the courtroom to the boardroom and beyond

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*Nick Gradisar's gift for negotiation has cast him in many roles.*

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By PETER STRESCINO  
THE PUEBLO CHIEFTAIN

He's got the touch.

"It's not a magic touch, not a golden touch," said friend Ray Kogovsek. "It's the right touch."

"He" is Nick Gradisar, a longtime Pueblo lawyer and political adviser who has worked in arenas as diverse as Democratic Party chairman, head of the Greater Pueblo Chamber of Commerce and master of the annual Gradisar family holiday potica-making get-together.

Talk about diversity.

"Maybe this is because we Bojons all stick together," said Kogovsek, one of Pueblo's main political pack animals, "but he's a fantastic guy, a leader, a great party chairman and a damned good attorney." That's a lot, even for a person like Gradisar, omnipresent at Pueblo political and civic gatherings large and small.

Gradisar, a 1967 graduate of South High School, was raised by working-class Puebloans on what was then Pueblo's "end of the line," the far reaches of Prairie Avenue. His father, Tony, a CF&I worker who also raised greyhounds and built every home he lived in except the one where he was born, was a staunch, but not active, Democrat.

"I didn't do too great in my last couple of years at South," Gradisar said recently in the South Side offices of his firm, Gradisar Trechter Ripperger and Roth. "I was partying quite a bit."

"Let's just say he was a very, very active child," said his mother, Lila, with a smile and an end-of-sentence chuckle reminiscent of her son's. "But he was a big reader and always involved in lots of things."

In the mid-1960s, a time in America when change came faster than a gas-price hike on a holiday weekend, Nick Gradisar was not blind to the times.

"I attended a conference on nonviolent civil disobedience in Black Forest (north of Colorado Springs)," he said. "I grew up next to a black family, my best friends. But that conference was an eye-opener to the civil rights movement."

After South, Gradisar attended the University of Colorado at Boulder for a year before transferring to Southern Colorado State College, now Colorado State University-Pueblo.



CHIEFTAIN PHOTO/BRYAN KELSEN -- Pueblo lawyer Nick Gradisar stands behind the desk at his South Side office.



Nick Gradisar as a baby ...



at about 8 ...



at South High School ...



and as a college student.

Young activist

"I organized for (Minnesota Sen. Eugene) McCarthy at CU and got real involved in the anti-war movement," said Gradisar, now 59.

That war, Vietnam, angered many young Americans and set generation against generation. It spawned nonviolent and violent political action, of which Gradisar identified with the former. That became a longtime Gradisar characteristic, working for change within the system.

"We had parades down Main Street, carrying a casket," he remembered of the anti-war days. "I was very active."

Political action accelerated Gradisar's interests in, of all things, his studies.

"I thought that part of what I could do to improve things was to get an education."

Gradisar said he was a member of the peace movement, not an anarchist. Maybe that was because he was already married and had two children and inherited his parents' strong work ethic. During college summers he was no lay-about, working at the steel mill. "(The mill) is a great motivator to get an education," he said.

Gradisar's two kids are Douglas, who is a lawyer in his firm, and Tracy Mosco, who works for the Pueblo County Sheriff's Office. Gradisar is divorced.

After graduation from SCSC in December 1971, Gradisar matriculated to Drake University in Iowa, to attend law school. "I worked my way through law school," he said. "Dishwasher, hod carrier, CF&I. My wife was with Mountain Bell and she easily transferred to Iowa."

"The first year was brutal," he said. "It was all-consuming."

After that year immersing himself in book studies, Gradisar worked in the school's renowned legal clinic system, where prospective attorneys are thrust into the day-to-day world of lawyering.

The former indifferent student finished in the top 10 percent of the class, he said, but it was another event, the dawning of the now-famous Iowa caucuses, that furthered his political interests.

"I had been on the student senate at SCSC and worked in Colorado for (future U.S. Sen.) Gary Hart," Gradisar said. "In Iowa, where I was a precinct chairman, I was supporting (former Democratic vice-presidential candidate) Sargent Shriver. The Democratic candidates started coming to Iowa. I had been to Pueblo County assemblies, but Iowa was wild, with fistfights in the hallways."

### Coming home

After graduation from Drake in 1976, he lived and worked in Denver for about a year, but he missed Pueblo and returned.

"I worked for Alan Jensen when I got here, and went out on my own in 1979, sharing an office with Charlie Trechter and Larry McCray."

Working primarily in civil law and government, Gradisar began to carve out his niche in Pueblo which, really, defies the meaning of the word "niche."

He is part of many facets of the city and county, including former and current positions in litigation, public trustee, Pueblo Democratic Party chairman, president of the Pueblo Board of Water Works and chairman of the board for the Greater Pueblo Chamber of Commerce.

"I'm a yellow-dog Democrat," Gradisar said. That means, in the popular context of the phrase, that he'd vote for a yellow dog before he'd vote for a Republican.

Which is a funny position to be in when a Democrat finds himself leading a chamber of commerce, an organization that is normally as Republican as a Lincoln Day dinner.

"He is certainly a Democrat," said Rod Slyhoff, executive director of the chamber. "But he always amazed me how he could look at both sides of an issue. Some in this community thought we were

crazy to make him chairman, but he accomplished a lot during his time in the job."

In 1983, Gradisar ran for City Council and lost to Paul Jones. He has since been elected to the water board, his only other run at public office.

"Losing (to Jones) didn't sour me on politics," Gradisar said. "Politics is the way you accomplish change."

Despite his easygoing nature, Gradisar said when he was party chief he made decisions in internal races.

"I picked sides," he said. "I have strong feelings about people."

Current Party Chairman Terry Hart called Gradisar "adept at politics."

"We've worked together since the early 1980s, and Nick's a wonderful guy to share political and legal experiences with."

Some of Gradisar's strong feelings are evident when he speaks about the insurance industry.

"The No. 1 issue in the country right now is reforming health care," said Gradisar, who represents people against insurance companies. "We can't continue to do it like we do it."

"The insurance industry is way out of control and has a debilitating effect on the economy."

Gradisar said that the premiums people pay "go to the top (executives) and are not getting back to Pueblo. Insurance companies do not want to compensate people and they pick off legislatures state-by-state, make people criminals if they don't carry insurance; they control all the data and then call it proprietary.

"They suck the profits out of the system. If the insurance companies are in control of a changed system, then we're in trouble."

In a newspaper interview several years ago, Gradisar articulated his support for a strong mayoral system of government in Pueblo.

Law review

In his practice, Gradisar has represented Pueblo County in court before District Court Judge Scott Epstein, now retired.

"Nick was always prepared, he knew his stuff and was succinct, didn't waste my time, which I greatly appreciated," Epstein said. "He did mental health work, forced medications, short-term and long-term certifications.

"Nick's a real professional and a real gentleman."

Gradisar is close to another big problem, home foreclosures. He is public trustee, a job he held under former Gov. Roy Romer for 12 years and now for the past two under Gov. Bill Ritter. Colorado is the only state to have a public trustee, a position established in 1894. The trustee handles the release of deeds when mortgages are paid and foreclosures when they are not.

"It's an important role, especially in these times," Gradisar said. "You never like to see anyone get themselves in that situation. There were a lot of bad loans made, and banks buy back their properties at less than the loan made, which means a decrease in property values."

Gradisar is in his last year of his first term on the water board. He said he plans to run for a second, six-year term in November.

"We've gotten involved in some big projects, one the Bessemer Ditch," he said of his time on the board, the last four years as president. The board is seeking to buy shares in the ditch, facilitated by a recent bylaw change by ditch share-owners.

"I am not a water lawyer, but water work is fascinating. It has given me tremendous appreciation for utilities and water work.

"We are investing in our future and our infrastructure. We want to expand the (Pueblo) reservoir. Politics will make that complicated."

He said he knows that some people don't like the board's dealings with entities like Aurora, but pointed out that agreements that bring more than \$1 million a year help keep rates low for customers.

Alan Hamel, the executive director of the water works, said he is pleased with Gradisar's work on the board.

"Our board gets a lot of information on complex topics," Hamel said. "And in a real short period of time, he picked it up and grasped it.

"Nick has great leadership skills. He has moved the board forward during an exciting and challenging time. He represents our board and our customers very well."

None of which surprises mom Lila, who still lives at the family's South Side spread. He is the oldest of her five children.

"He's pretty confident," she said of her son. "He's sure of himself. But he also studies something that he decides to be involved in.

"I think he disagrees with lots of people who he is friends with anyway," said Lila, who despite coming from Nebraska Republican stock became an active Pueblo Democrat. "He's a good negotiator and he's honest. He's a people person."

Of his leadership skills, she marveled, "And he's the dough master when we make potica. He's always been a really good family person."

Kogovsek, a member of Gradisar's public "family," said Gradisar makes things look easy, even when he's involved in so many activities.

"Nick's willing to put his name on the line," Kogovsek said. "He's got a great sense of humor, always has a smile and a warm handshake.

"He loves this town. He's a Pueblo classic."