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Jeffrey T. Renz

University of Montana School of Law, jeff.renz@umontana.edu

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ACLU legal director to pay rare visit to our state

Player in crucial liberties cases to deliver keynote at MT ACLU annual meeting on Feb. 29

Steve Shapiro, the national legal director of ACLU, will speak at the University of Montana School of Law on Friday, Feb. 29, at noon, in the Castles Center. On March 1, at 7 p.m. at the Doubletree Hotel, Mr. Shapiro will tell the ACLU membership "How to Preserve Civil Liberties in the Age of Terror." Professor Jeff Renz, the author of this profile of Mr. Shapiro, said, "This will be, as far as I can remember, only the second visit by an ACLU national legal director in the past 20 years."



Steve Shapiro

By **Jeffrey T. Renz**, professor
UM School of Law

I first met Steve Shapiro in the mid-1980s, when he was on the legal staff of the American Civil Liberties Union's New York affiliate. I think it is safe to say that then, as now, New York affiliate's attorneys were stars in their respective areas of expertise.

It is a mark of Shapiro's dedication that this attorney, who graduated Harvard Law magnum cum laude, and clerked for Circuit Judge J. Edward Lumbard, joined the ACLU staff immediately following his clerkship, although undoubtedly many other lucrative opportunities lay before him.

In addition to being a fine legal scholar and an outstanding appellate advocate, Shapiro has been noted for throwing mean elbows in pickup basketball games.

In 1993, when ACLU National Legal Director John Powell returned to teaching, Shapiro became the first ACLU career-attorney to become national legal director. He has had and continues to have quite a tenure.

Shapiro's name appears as counsel-of-record or co-counsel in 87 cases before the U.S. Supreme Court and in scores of cases before the U.S. Courts of Appeals. He presides over the largest civil rights law office in the United States. He supervises more than 90 attorneys who specialize in every conceivable area of civil rights litigation. In addition, he and his legal staff provide support for the ACLU affiliate offices in nearly all 50 states, and offer countless hours of support and expertise

to the ACLU's volunteer cooperating attorneys.

Consider this. When Shapiro became legal director, few state affiliate offices had full-time staff, much less a staff attorney. I served as the ACLU of Montana's legal director for a decade (until 1992) and volunteered throughout that time. Now every state ACLU affiliate has at least one full-time staff attorney. Montana recently hired its second. We used to hold staff attorney meetings in a small hall down the hall from the small hall that held the affiliate staff meetings. In 2008, however, the meeting of ACLU affiliate staff counted more than 600 participants.

I haven't been to a staff meeting in 15 years. I remember them as the most re-invigorating event of my year. They were small and informal.

All of the civil rights luminaries were there. We listened to war stories about Stephen J. Gould, crazy defendants, amazing victories, and disturbing defeats. We never left without the greatest feeling of optimism, not because of the times or the events (this was the Reagan-Bush era, after all), but because we saw how beautiful and bountiful our colleagues' minds were. We knew that if we ran into a thorny problem in Glasgow, Montana, we could pick the phone up and there would be Shapiro or another member of the legal staff to brainstorm with.

And these efforts bore fruit. The rights of American Indians to vote are now entrenched, thanks to the ACLU. Montana's prisons, jails, and mental institutions are no longer places of horror, thanks to the ACLU. Freedom of choice prevails, thanks to the ACLU. The right to speak freely, the right not to be compelled to speak or to pray in a given way prevails, thanks to the ACLU. Our homes and our private conversations are safe from prying, thanks to the ACLU. Our students learn science in science classes, thanks to the ACLU. Books once banned in our local national park bookstores are now available, thanks to the ACLU. Bibles are on high school library shelves, thanks to the ACLU. In Montana alone, the list goes on and on and it is lengthy in large part because of Steven Shapiro's work.

If you have an interest in the 1st through the 27th Amendments of the Constitution, or the rest of that 18th Century text, the Feb. 29 keynote is an event for you. Stay away from the basketball court, however. ○

WHAT: American Civil Liberties Union of Montana Annual Meeting.

WHERE: Doubletree Hotel, Missoula

WHEN: 1-10 p.m., Saturday, March 1

WORKSHOPS: Civil liberties workshops began at 2:15 p.m. Learn more about "Civil Liberties under the Big Sky." Suggested \$20 donation for workshops.

RECEPTION AND BANQUET: Begin at 6 p.m. Cost is \$40.

KEYNOTE ADDRESS: ACLU National Legal Director Steve Shapiro delivers banquet keynote speech. Meet him at the reception before the banquet.

WHO CAN COME: Public invited.