



BRIAN BRAINERD/THE DENVER POST

COLORADO PIONEERS

Peter Groff and Terrance Carroll broke ground by being the first African Americans to lead both chambers of a state legislature at the same time. But they'd rather keep the focus on the work than on race.

BY ED SEALOVER

Two months into their historic tenure as the first African Americans to lead both chambers of the legislature in one state at the same time, Colorado House Speaker Terrance Carroll and Senate President Peter Groff would talk to anyone who would listen about budget deficits, constitutional spending limits and higher-education funding.

There was just one subject the two Democrats from northeast Denver did not want to discuss: Their historic tenure as the first African Americans to lead both chambers of the legislature in one state at the same time.

“I said to my brother-in-law: ‘How many more of these do we need to do?’ ” Groff said during an interview in his office in March, three days after yet another celebration dinner honoring the duo for their accomplishment. “He said to me: ‘You need to think about what is being accomplished here.’ ”

“I understand the historic nature of it. I understand how important it is for people of color to see a person of color hold these

positions. But I do think you get to the point where you say: ‘OK, we’ve done that, and now let’s get on to the business at hand.’ ”

Looking at the Colorado legislature as it stood upon adjournment in early May, it could be viewed as both natural and yet impossible to overlook what the men had done.

Consider this: Groff and Carroll were the only African-American legislators in the 100-person body in 2009, making their historic combination both a triumph of their race and, in some ways, proof that their race had nothing to do with the positions they occupied.

Left, House Speaker Terrance Carroll is now the only African American in the Colorado General Assembly.

DIFFERENT PATHS

Though the men are both attorneys and live less than 10 blocks from each other, they come from very different backgrounds.

Groff, 46, is the son of a state senator. He attended college in California, came home to get involved in politics, and worked his way up from a councilwoman's legislative aide to a senior adviser for a mayor.

As a governor's office ombudsman, he would sit in the Senate gallery and watch his dad until he was told to get back to work. He naturally jumped at the first opportunity to serve in the House, winning election in 2000.

Carroll, 40, grew up in the poor and violent Capitol Hill and Anacostia neighborhoods of Washington, D.C., the only son of a single mom who was a sharecropper's daughter. He came to Colorado to get a doctorate in political science, worked as a police officer, a chaplain and a youth counselor. He won appointment in 2003 to the House seat that opened when Groff left to fill a Senate vacancy.

Their reputations grew early as party leaders, yet mavericks. They led charges with fellow Democrats on criminal-justice reform and bucked their political cohorts by fighting for school choice. In 2004, they co-sponsored a bill creating a state institute to help establish charter schools in districts that were not friendly to the idea.

Groff ascended to his chamber's top post first, winning election as president in late 2007. He served until the end of this session, when he resigned to take a job as director of the Faith-Based and Community Initiatives Center in the U.S. Department of Education.

Carroll, meanwhile, expected to be House majority leader, but after Representative Bernie Buescher, the heavy favorite to succeed the term-limited speaker, lost his seat in the general election, Carroll stepped up two days later and won the post.

CONTRASTING STYLES

During the past session, Groff and Carroll had breakfast once a week. Though they are close friends, Groff says the morning meetings were mainly about communication.

For the most part, the planning led to a symbiotic relationship in backing and advanc-

ing the legislation both viewed as important for Colorado. Over opposition from Republicans and even from some Democrats, they shepherded through one bill that eliminates a key spending limit in the state budget and another that generates some \$250 million annually for state roadways by raising registration fees on vehicles.

But while Groff might refer to Carroll as his "political Siamese twin," Republicans and Democrats say the men have very different leadership styles.

Groff, who remembers clashes with party leaders when he was a younger legislator, did

"I understand the historic nature of it. ... But I do think you get to the point where you say: 'OK, we've done that, and now let's get on to the business at hand.'"

—PETER GROFF

not try to run the Senate Democrats with an iron fist.

"I struggle with how you give that flexibility to your members," he says of letting them dissent on key issues without threatening political repercussions. "I'm going to err on the side of allowing it if you're doing it for heartfelt reasons and ideological reasons as opposed to political reasons."

That attitude has won him amity not only from many within his party but also from those on the other side of the aisle. Former Senate Minority Leader Andy McElhany, who opposed Groff on a number of issues during the six years they served together, calls him "really easy to work with."

The relaxed leash on members, however, has cost him. After lengthy debate on a bill that would have allowed children of illegal immigrants to receive in-state college tuition rates if they graduated from Colorado high schools—a bill Groff called one of the most important of 2009—five Democrats voted against the measure, killing it.

Below, Former Senate President Peter Groff talks with Senator Josh Penry on the last day of the 2009 legislative session.



ANDY CROSS/THE DENVER POST



HELEN RICHARDSON/THE DENVER POST

House Speaker Terrance Carroll, left, talks with then-Senate President Peter Groff, second from left, Governor Bill Ritter and former Speaker Andrew Romanoff, right.

Carroll, meanwhile, quickly acquired a reputation for taking a stronger stand than Groff on what legislation would make it through his chamber. His goal, he said, was to ensure that only the most important bills got to Governor Bill Ritter's desk.

Carroll acknowledged his role in some of those decisions. Two bills—a ban on puppy mills and another requiring urban cat owners to put identification on their animals—died before they had a chance to undergo long floor debates. “We problem-solved,” he says simply.

He is reluctant, however, to acknowledge what colleagues say is a skillful ability to bury bills even from his own party members that are not central to the legislative leader's agenda. Republicans in particular pointed out that a large number of very liberal bills died in the House Business Affairs and Labor

Committee, though Carroll denied asking centrist members to use it as a kill committee.

Despite the heavier legislative hand, Carroll is known as the more laid-back of the chamber leaders. His assistant, Victoria Scott-Haynes, says she's told him that he needs to get meaner, and House majority communications director Katie Reinisch noted that staffers now “look forward to our daily 4 o'clock fist bump.”

“I'm domesticating the terrorist fist bump,” says Carroll in his typical deadpan delivery.

OPENING SPOTS TO MINORITIES

Carroll shares Groff's general aversion to talking about their first-in-the-country accomplishment, though that is less obvious in looking at the pure amount of talking he does. On a two-day break in late February, he spoke in nine cities across the state with fellow Democrats and is more likely to turn up giving his thoughts at a banquet than any other member of the legislature.

Both men do see their positions, however, as a chance to increase the number of African

Americans serving in state government.

Groff pushed hard to open key positions to minorities and women. There were no African Americans on the Senate Democratic staff at the time of his appointment. Before leaving for his new post, Groff's chief of staff was a black woman, his legislative director was a black man and a Hispanic woman and a white woman headed the Senate press office.

Carroll, meanwhile, says he is trying to use his influence on the next generation of potential African-American leaders, showing them that a life of public service is valuable. Only if the legislature increases its diversity—in race, in age, in background of its members—can it truly reflect the state of Colorado, he says.

Both men have been flooded with praise, particularly from older African Americans. Those constituents will stop them in restaurants or in the dry cleaners and say their accomplishments make them feel the work they did in the civil rights movement in the 1960s is paying off.

MICHAEL JOHNSTON

When Peter Groff resigned from the Senate in May Colorado to take a job in the Obama administration, a vacancy committee appointed school principal Michael Johnston to fill the position until 2010, when an election will be held to fill the last two years of Groff's term.

The appointment of Johnston, who is white, means Senate District 33 in northeast Denver will not be filled by an African American for the first time in 50 years. He was chosen over former Representative Rosemary Marshall, businessman Anthony Graves and community activist Renee Blanchard, all of whom are African American. The 2000 census reported the district was 35 percent black, 31 percent Hispanic and 28.8 percent white. The departure of Groff, who is African American, means there is only one black member of the Colorado General Assembly, House Speaker Terrance Carroll.

MICHAEL JOHNSTON

Age: 34

Education:

- ◆ B.A. Yale University
- ◆ M.A. Education, Harvard University
- ◆ J.D. Yale University



Background: Johnston was born in Vail, Colo., the son of Mayor Paul Johnston. After receiving his undergraduate degree, he taught high school in Greenville, Miss., and later wrote a book about the experience, *In the Deep Heart's Core*. He founded the organization New Leaders for New Schools, which was dedicated to training leaders for urban schools. He returned to Colorado and founded the Mapleton Expeditionary School for the Arts, a charter school in Thornton, Colo. He later joined Barack Obama's presidential campaign as an education advisor.

Family: Johnston, his wife, and their two children live in Denver's Stapleton neighborhood.

But while the opening-day buzz around the Capitol was about the barrier-breaking duo, less and less mention was heard about race as the session wore on.

House Minority Leader Mike May, who lauded Carroll for his open communication with Republicans, saw past the race issue early and instead focused on their policies, capabilities and willingness to work with others.

And that, added McElhany, may be Groff's and Carroll's legacy on Colorado: Making the state stop thinking about its officials in terms of their race.

"If you work closely with people of different races, it takes only about 30 minutes until you don't even notice they're of a different race," he says. "I think certainly the legislature itself has been color-blind." 

 **CHECK OUT** a Q&A with House Speaker Terrance Carroll at www.ncsl.org/magazine.