LaVoie says she is tool for democracy

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WINSTED — Community Lawyer Charlene LaVoie said yesterday that people who have been "badmouthing" her office are actually reacting to residents who speak their minds about "the unexplained and irresponsible actions of our public officials."

This statement was part of a brief presentation she gave to the Winchester Taxpayers Association concerning the role of a community lawyer in a town. LaVoie has been a highly visible and controversial figure in Winsted since she became involved in the firestorm surrounding the firing of Town Manager Wayne W. Dove in November.

Inviting LaVoie to speak before 50 people on Sunday was one of the first actions taken by the group's new president, Selectman Walter D. Miller. He said she was invited because a community lawyer provides access to government, something the taxpayers group is seeking.

In November, LaVoie demanded more information from the Board of Selectmen about the Dove firing. She later prepared a petition in protest of the board's action, which was signed by 1,600 residents. Later her office helped to get Winsted residents the right to vote on the firing at a referendum. For all of this, she has accumulated a share of blunt critics as well as admirers.

Some have been dismayed at what they describe as LaVoie's excessive influence on town political issues. But she insisted yesterday that she holds no more power than anyone else in a democratic system of government. All she has is "the tool of persuasion. We all have the tools of persuasion."

She said that in the case involving Dove, she never instigated anything. In her words, it was the people who came to her seeking to take action and she was merely providing them with the means, by clarifying the process of filing petitions, speaking out and gaining more access to government.

The taxpayers association audience was a highly sympathetic one. Members applauded her statements, and at one point, member LeeAnne LaClaire said, "I think we're fortunate in having Charlene. Every town (should have a community lawyer's office.) Those who oppose this basically oppose all citizens' rights. Having Charlene, we know what we can say and do. My hat goes off to her."

Recently, LaVoie has been accused of being politically motivated. Yesterday, LaVoie said that too often people confuse political action with involvement in party politics. She is involved in politics, like everyone else in the community. But she steers clear of party politics, and refuses to give counsel to selectmen, she said.

She has taken issue with selectmen on some matters, but at the next turn she may find herself at odds with a different set of selectmen, she said.

"We also play a role as a watchdog," LaVoie said, and that is the role for which the office is perhaps most widely known, especially in the last few months. LaVoie is a constant presence at the selectmen's meetings. "The more you attend or watch with consistency, the more you understand the process," she said.



CHARLENE LAVOIE

The community lawyer's office, established and funded by Ralph Nader and his sister, Claire, has only been in Winsted for about three years, and is the only office of its kind in the country.

But LaVoie said that people in Winsted have been questioning government and have been actively involved in the political process for hundreds of years.