THE ROCKY MOUNTAIN COLLEGIAN

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CSUnicorn Task Force draws attention away from Plaza preaching

Collegian | Sara Shaver

The CSUnicorn Task Force, an unofficial student organization, dances on The Plaza with a pride flag to spread joy amid the presence of religious and anti-abortion groups Sept. 12.

Samy Gentle, Staff Reporter
September 20, 2022

The Lory Student Center Plaza is a place on campus for a variety of groups to set up tables, signs or simply speak to spread their messages to the passersby.

This includes certain religious groups who preach their values to students, and these groups are protected under the university's free speech statement: "CSU acknowledges the rights of students and others to engage in free speech and to assemble in groups for peaceful purposes."

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Some students feel uncomfortable with the messages being spread on The Plaza and have responded in the form of the CSUnicorn Task Force, which is "a group of students who dress up in unicorn costumes and dance around on The Plaza with signs and give out high-fives and hugs to counteract any triggering messaging or hate speech on campus," according to an email from Charlie Williamson, one of the unicorns.

"There are a lot of queer and trans folks in particular who have a lot of religious trauma, so a lot of the incidents where there's really aggressive preaching and spreading messages of intolerance against our community — it's not just annoying, it can be really triggering and pretty tough for folks to deal with," said Ali Owens, another unicorn.

> "Our goal is to take the audience away from the hate and minimize the harm to marginalized community members." *–Charlie Williamson, CSUnicorn Task Force member*

The task force came about when students who were uncomfortable with the preaching on The Plaza tried to find a way to draw attention away from the preachers, who are protected under free speech rights, without yelling or actively protesting, Owens said.

"Free speech is important, right?" Owens said. "We shouldn't be taking anyone's rights away, so how should we be responding to this in a way that doesn't step on anyone else's rights and counteract the message without things getting ugly?"

"The unicorns made their first appearance at the end of (last semester) during finals week to help lift spirits," Williamson wrote.

The CSUnicorn Task Force is an unofficial student organization. While comprised of many students involved with the Pride Resource Center, Owens said the task force is not affiliated or run by it.

However, the unicorn suits worn by members of the task force are owned and provided by the Pride Resource Center, Williamson wrote.

The unicorns operate via group chat, and "if someone is in The Plaza and happens to see (the preachers), they send the call out, like, 'Whoever is available, come on by; grab a costume,' and we will go out there," Owens said.

"There are about 15 people in the group chat, and (the task force has) been talking about trying to add more so there is a larger pool of people who would be available more often," Owens said.

The task force deals with more than just distracting from preaching.

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"We have walked students across The Plaza so they didn't have to see preachers and held dance parties across from anti-choice organizations," Williamson wrote.

As for how other Colorado State University students can help the unicorns: "Interact with us!" Williamson wrote. "Our goal is to take the audience away from the hate and minimize the harm to marginalized community members. … We'd love to dance around with folks, take pictures (and) give hugs or high-fives."

Other groups also have issues with some of the preaching on The Plaza.

"Like most Christian organizations on campus, we're not at all connected to the people preaching," wrote Amy Ahrens on behalf of Cru at CSU. "They have no connection to the university, and we don't condone what they're saying."

The CSUnicorn Task Force has been met with positive feedback from the community.

Owens said someone emailed the Pride Resource Center assuming the task force was involved with the organization, saying, "I was feeling really apprehensive about being in the presence of these people that are saying these things and being preached at and all that. Then I saw the unicorns and the bubbles and the music, and it made what could have been a really tough experience so much better."

"A lot of the time, it's easy to want to engage in protest by yelling, and sometimes that's effective, but in situations like this, I think it's more effective to focus on how we can bring love and joy to the situation," Owens said.

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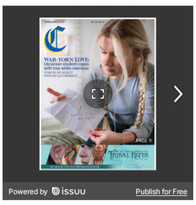

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