



## Students, faculty reflect on chalking as tool for protest, activism

Carlee Elders, Staff Reporter

March 11, 2025



Collegian | Lauren Mascardo

The Free Speech sign outside the Lory Student Center encourages students to table, put up signs, and share their opinion on the LSC plaza, Mar. 9.

In the middle of the Lory Student Center Plaza, crouched in a squat position, Colorado State University junior Sophia Johnson uses a light yellow Crayola chalk marker to touch up one of her previous works, once bright blue but now faded on the pavement.

The large sans serif font read, “Let this radicalize you rather than lead you to despair.”

Johnson was lucky that only feet and bicycle wheels had worn the chalk out. Not everyone agrees with what she says or respects her First Amendment right to express it. One day, she found that her drawing of President Donald Trump and a guillotine had been washed away.

Throughout history, activists have used chalk to spread awareness of their cause. Johnson is one of those activists, making her mark at CSU.

“(Chalk) is free speech, and with everything that’s happening and me having my rights systematically taken away from me, ... this is my way of kind of being able to take control of what I can do and exercise the rights I have while I still have them.” -*Sophia Johnson, Colorado State University student.*

### A pot of boiling passion

During her first week at CSU, Johnson saw a man holding up a sign, voicing his beliefs on campus.

“(The comments were) Islamophobic, homophobic, transphobic, very sexist (and) very misogynistic,” Johnson said.

Although he received pushback from those on campus, he did not stop. The memory of his presence embedded itself into Johnson’s brain.

She decided to act, setting aside two-to-three days a week to express her beliefs where her fellow CSU students could see.

The pot filled with passion began to boil in her small hometown of Pueblo, Colorado. Her first actions as an activist, however, were far from small. During high school, Johnson founded the Gender & Sexuality Alliance club. Following the overturning of Roe v. Wade, Johnson held a citywide protest in Pueblo, demanding that her body be released from the government’s restraints.

As the time drew near to vote on Amendment 79 in 2024, which gives women in Colorado the right to have an abortion paid for with state insurance, Johnson gained support by collecting signatures, facilitating voter registration and handing out contraceptives, to name a few.

Her anger overflowed following Trump’s presidential inauguration. The DEI initiative was overturned, threatening Johnson’s chances for employment as a young brown woman in America.

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### Activist in the craft section

On the bottom shelf of a children’s craft section, shoppers will likely find a large box containing 48 chalk markers. Little do they know, these colorful sticks that stain kids’ hands have been activists’ tool for decades.

CSU’s policy on free speech and peaceful assembly dedicates an **entire section** to how students can use chalk on campus.

“Chalking is allowed only on the horizontal concrete ground (not on steps, paving stones, buildings or walls) and must be at least 15 feet away from any building entrance,” the website reads. It states that washable chalk must be used for these writings and drawings.

“Folks who work in the student center, you work for students,” said Pamela Norris, Associate Executive Director of the Lory Student Center. “We’re trying to figure out how to uplift and elevate student opportunities to share their thoughts and concerns, even if that is against the administration.”

Norris said they are less concerned about the chalk message and more about how they can enforce it within the bounds defined by this policy.

“A lot of campuses don’t have a plaza that is anywhere near the size of ours to be able to chalk like that,” Norris said. “I think it is a really special part of campus.”

Professor of communication studies Karrin Vasby Anderson, who teaches an undergraduate course on political communication at CSU and studies gender and political identity, acknowledged that political cartoons and writing like Johnson’s have been utilized as an effective form of protest.

“This is a strategy that Banksy has used (along with) many artists throughout history, and so that’s always been a form of protest that has been recognized,” Anderson said.

Johnson said her artistic choice was inspired by activists in the Black Lives Matter movement who used chalk to spread the message to anyone looking at the ground.

“In Denver, walking around, you would see all sorts of BLM kind of chalk everywhere,” Johnson said.

One of Johnson’s friends, who is Palestinian, approached her after viewing her art.

“This work gives her hope and (reminds her) she’s not alone in her beliefs” Johnson said.

Johnson’s friends are not the only people who show appreciation. Johnson said people of all backgrounds come and thank her for speaking out.

### An activist’s groceries

“The first step to activism is to take care of our community,” Johnson said.

How? With something as simple as a handheld grocery basket.

The black basket is decorated with small butterfly stickers, and a label lists web browsers safe from the government’s eye. Crowded together on the sides, there are a variety of QR codes that are designed to help struggling students. One directs students to a website that can help them receive abortion funds. Others include a helpline for Black transgender people and students who risk going back to red states because tuition is too expensive.

Johnson always keeps her “mutual aid basket” close. The resources inside help get people who pass by involved while they’re having fun being college students.

“When I get on the bus or (am) walking around Old Town, people can stop me and get some goodies,” Johnson said. “The purpose of my talk is to draw in people. ... They can kind of see what I am doing on a deeper level.”

Inside the basket, students can find hand-printed flyers for meetings and petitions for the **Young Democrats**, which Johnson is an organizer of. She also includes heart-shaped queer flag stickers, legal rights cards for undocumented people, pregnancy strips, naloxone in case of an overdose, emergency Plan B and even small packets of fruit snacks in case students are hungry.

“Each Plan B I hand out, that is life-changing,” Johnson said. “That is going to stop a whole different alternate reality of someone caring for a baby and struggling with unwanted pregnancy. And so it’s these little domino effects that we’re putting in place. They all lead to something bigger.”

### Freedom is a struggle

Johnson has been approached by people who discourage her work.

“A lot of people have issues, specifically with my ‘free Gaza’ and with my ‘free Palestine’ (chalking),” Johnson said. “People get really triggered over that.”

On the surface, verbally attacking Johnson or washing away her art appears immoral and harsh, but according to Anderson, this is just another exercise of free will.

“Counter-protest is allowed in the free speech zone, so either writing oppositional messages or even washing messages away,” Anderson said. “They are both forms of protest.”

Anderson said that, in her opinion, there are better ways to engage, for example, with the situation in Gaza than through faceless protest.

“People of different political wings or religions should try to come together and share a meal and their perspectives,” Anderson said. “Engagement like that is a much more fruitful way to talk through some of these really hard issues.”

According to Johnson, facing criticism or getting involved is not the most difficult obstacle, whichever approach an activist may choose.

“The hardest part of being an activist is feeling like you’re failing constantly because we are in regression,” Johnson said.

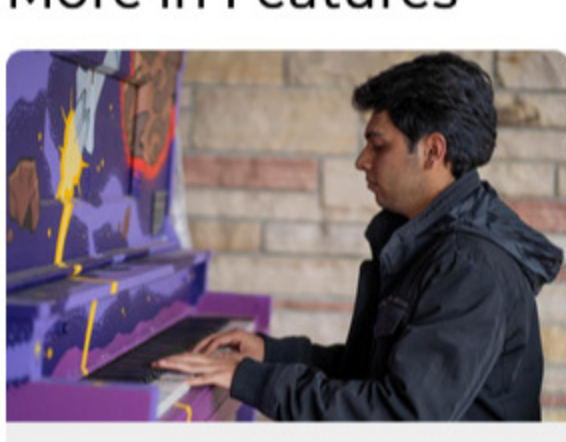
Johnson takes pride in her contribution to the success of Amendment 79 but is saddened that, under the Trump administration, it means nothing. Despite this, she still holds her head high.

“Like Angela Davis said, freedom is a constant struggle,” Johnson said.

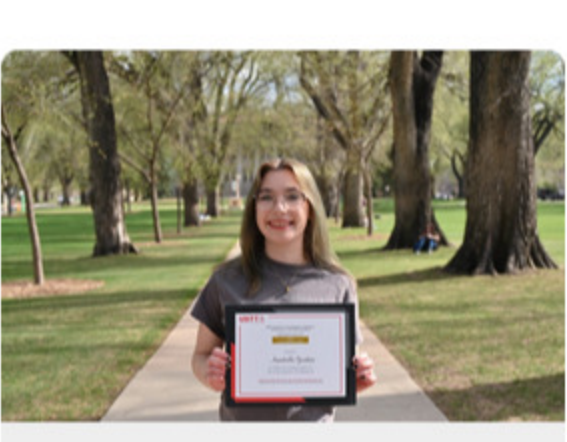
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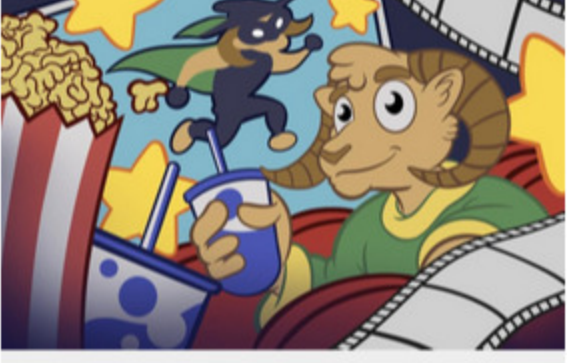


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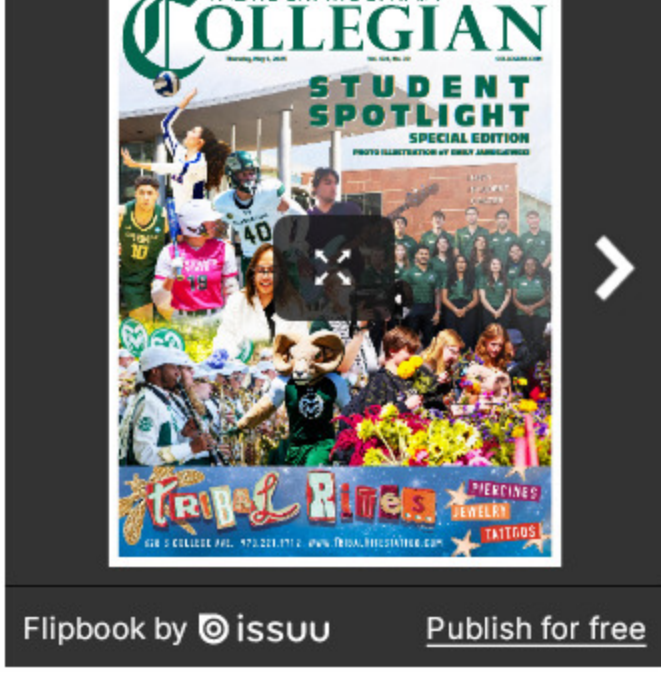


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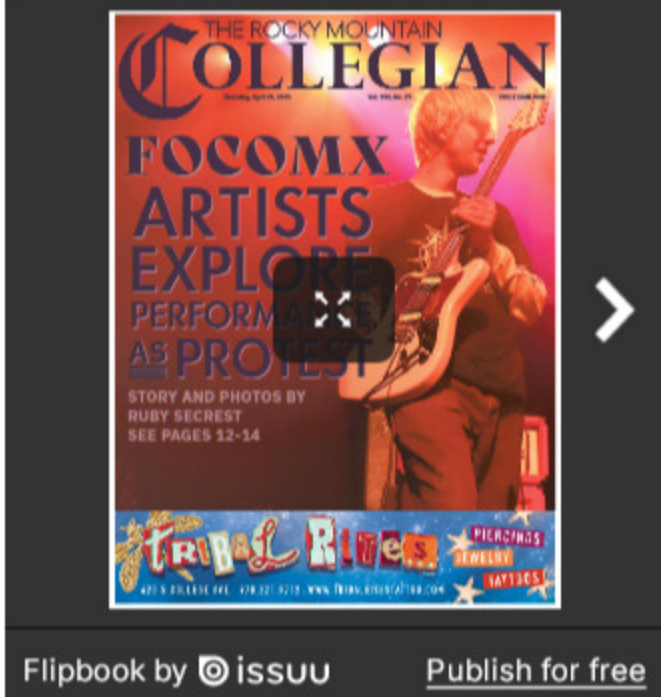
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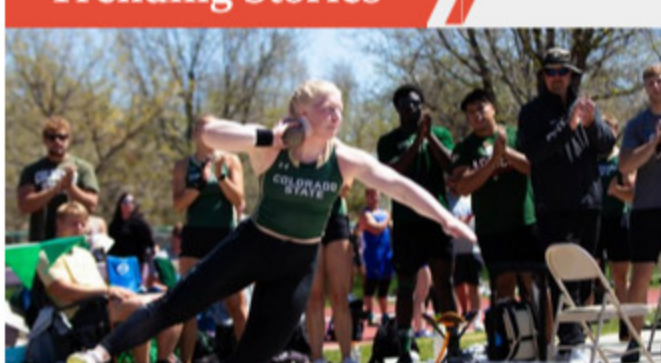


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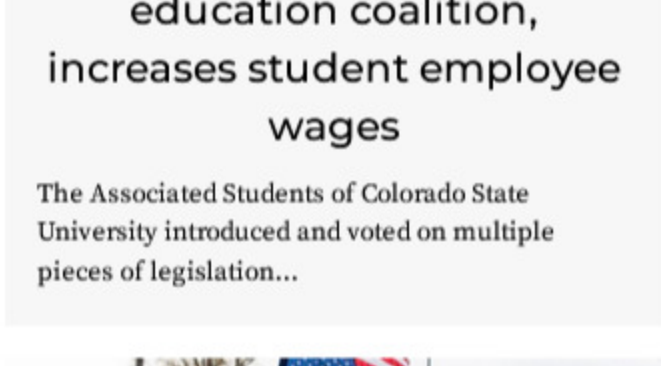
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