

Hope & Fear in Minnesota's Heartland



DAVE SCHWARZ/ST. CLOUD TIMES

Hope & Fear

Continued from Page 1A

While Farhiya has built a life for herself in St. Cloud, her longtime home has faced a bitter divide about its growing Somali refugee population, fueling an impassioned debate that's reverberated from coffee klatches to the St. Cloud Times' Opinion section, all the way up through City Hall.

For years, some residents have called for stopping the refugee program altogether, culminating in a 2017 temporary refugee halt proposed by a member of St. Cloud's City Council.

The effort, which the mayor said was legally unenforceable, overwhelmingly failed. All but one council member voted against the effort and, instead, the council passed a welcoming resolution. But two current council members ran – and won – on a 2018 platform questioning the resettlement program.

The tensions have galvanized activists, churches and community groups like #UniteCloud to push for a more welcoming city. From organizing community events to talking to individuals one-on-one, residents have grown a grassroots movement to counter anti-refugee sentiment – efforts they say are showing signs of progress.

But others have gone forward with a more hard-line approach, including a group of nativist activists asserting explicitly anti-Muslim rhetoric. And recent articles in the New York Times and The Economist put a national spotlight on the city, elevating a longstanding conflict about St. Cloud's changing demographics and an emotionally laden debate about the city's future.

Caught in the middle

Farhiya came to St. Cloud at age 15 after a brief stop in Louisiana and a 2-year stay in Marshall, Minnesota.

Like many immigrants, her family followed a family member's recommendation as well as job opportunities at a food processing plant in nearby Melrose.

She and her eight siblings were among the first Somali families to settle in the area in 2003 – Muslim, East African refugees who stood out among the predominantly white, German community in Central Minnesota.

"I came to St. Cloud and that's when I realized I was actually different," she said. "We were like so different. We looked different. We spoke different. And that was a shock."

Farhiya, now 30 years old, has lived in the city for nearly 15 years. She became a U.S. citizen, went to Tech High School and graduated from St. Cloud State University with a master's degree in social work. She now works as a social worker for Stearns County.

Last year, Farhiya and her sisters opened a coffee shop, a modest space tucked away in a strip mall. It was their mother's idea, but the sisters wanted to make it a space for community and con-

"I have a master's degree. I'm educated. I provide so much to this community. And I want to stay here. I want to raise my children here. But how do I raise my children in a society where they hate who we are?"

Farhiya Iman, above, a 16-year St. Cloud resident

versation.

Farhiya also got married and started a family of her own: a 3-year old daughter and infant son, whom she's always wanted to raise alongside her sisters and their children.

But Farhiya is increasingly worried about raising her children in St. Cloud. She can't help but wonder whether her daughter will endure the same harassment Farhiya did growing up. The glares in public. The bullying in school. The calls to "go back to your country."

"She was born here. So for someone to say that she doesn't belong in this community that she was born in is something that I cannot fathom as a mom," Farhiya said. "I don't want to ever come across someone telling my daughter that she doesn't belong here. And that's what I'm afraid of."

From Farhiya's perspective, she's done everything right, but it still isn't enough. And she's determined to give her kids a different childhood from her own, even if it means leaving her sisters, her mother and the place she's called home for nearly half her life.

"I have a master's degree. I'm educated. I provide so much to this community. And I want to stay here. I want to raise my children here," she said. "But how do I

raise my children in a society where they hate who we are?"

St. Cloud, the state's 10th-largest city, has grown into an increasingly diverse community in the past several decades. In the city of 68,000, nonwhite residents now make up 19.4 percent of the population, up from 10.6 percent in 2009, according to the American Community Survey, yearly estimates by the U.S. Census.

However, when it comes to the overall size of the Somali community in Central Minnesota, it's difficult to pinpoint an exact figure. That's due to a number of reasons, including minority populations are often underestimated in Census data, refugees frequently move inside the United States and it's challenging to narrow down children of Somali parents, many of which were born in the U.S. or another country besides Somalia.

Here's what we do know: The St. Cloud area has seen an influx of refugees from Somalia and other East African countries over the past decade.

Stearns County has resettled 1,774 primary refugees from 2005 to 2018, of which nearly 90% are Somali, according to the Minnesota Department of Health. Benton and Sherburne counties have resettled 117 and 46 refugees, respectively,

How we did this project

USA Today Network reporter Austen Macalus spent two months reporting this story with the help of St. Cloud Times photographers Dave Schwarz and Zach Dwyer.

Macalus relied on data from the U.S. Census' American Community Survey, the Minnesota Department of Health and the Minnesota Demographic Center. His reporting was also aided by previous coverage by St. Cloud Times journalists.

Macalus interviewed more than four dozen people, including: Somali residents, pro-refugee advocates and anti-refugee proponents; city leaders, state officials and local elected officials; researchers from the state Demographic Center and St. Cloud State University, and national experts on Islamophobia; faith leaders, community activists and political organizers; people who've lived in St. Cloud most of their lives and those who recently arrived.

in that time frame.

That makes one primary refugee for every 90 residents in Stearns County, the second-highest of any county in the state. Yet, the area's refugees still make up only a fraction of more than 34,000 primary refugees who have arrived in Minnesota since 2005.

Many more Somali immigrants are

See HOPE & FEAR, Page 5A



Hormud Market owner Hared Jibril removes graffiti from the front of the store in St. Cloud in 2010.

DAVE SCHWARZ/FILE/ST. CLOUD TIMES