

Hope & Fear in Minnesota's Heartland

Hope & Fear

Continued from Page 5A

residents have pushed back against the changes, but the city has been routinely praised for its inclusion and welcoming efforts.

Hussein, however, said that St. Cloud stands apart because of its large size and influence across the state. And he faults local residents, especially city leaders, for too often taking a neutral stance.

"The silence of the normal people in St. Cloud is defeating," he said. "What we need from St. Cloud residents is to tell people who are racist to knock it off, we are not going to accept that."

Council member Carol Lewis disagreed. She says St. Cloud has been wrongly miscast as "the poster child" of anti-refugee backlash.

"All of these folks down in the [Twin] Cities, they basically hold their nose when they talk about St. Cloud. Yet, I can tell you the same folks are there," she said. "This is everywhere."

Mayor Dave Kleis has also taken issue with the city's negative portrayal. He says the problem boils down to a few individuals, not the community as a whole.

"There are clearly individuals in every community ... that hate," he said. "I think St. Cloud has done better than a lot of communities when it comes to being welcoming as a community."

He pointed to the community's response to Crossroads Center stabbings where hundreds of residents came together for a Unity Rally following the attack. Though many people were "anticipating in what a lot of cases would have been a backlash," Kleis said, "we actually didn't see that here in St. Cloud. We actually saw a pretty united front."

Kleis also views sustained economic growth — like rising property values, upgrades to the city's bond ratings and stores like Costco moving in — as a sign of the city's welcoming atmosphere. "Those indicators tell a different story," he said. "Those are facts. Those aren't anecdotal."

Share your voice

St. Cloud's congressional delegation

■ Sixth District Rep. Tom Emmer: Email online at <https://emmer.house.gov/contact>. Office information: 315 Cannon House Office Building, Washington, DC 20515. Phone: 202-225-2331 Fax: 202-225-6475.

■ Sen. Amy Klobuchar: Email online at www.klobuchar.senate.gov/public/index.cfm/email-amy. Office information: 425 Dirksen Senate Building, Washington, DC 20510. Phone: 202-224-3244 Fax: 202-228-2186.

■ Sen. Tina Smith: Email online at www.smith.senate.gov/share-your-opinion. Office information: 720 Hart Senate Office Building, Washington, DC 20510. Phone: 202-224-5641.

St. Cloud mayor, City Council members

■ Mayor Dave Kleis: Email dave.kleis@ci.stcloud.mn.us. 400 Second St. S, St. Cloud, MN 56301. Phone: 320-255-7201 Fax: 320-255-7293.

■ Ward 1, Dave Masters: Email dave.masters@ci.stcloud.mn.us, 253-6825

■ Ward 2, Steve Laraway: steve.laraway@ci.stcloud.mn.us, 656-9345

■ Ward 3, Paul Brandmire: paul.brandmire@ci.stcloud.mn.us, 360-0374

■ Ward 4, Mike Conway: mike.conway@ci.stcloud.mn.us, 493-3695

■ At-large, Jeff Goerger: jeff.goerger@ci.stcloud.mn.us, 293-0562

■ At-large, George Hontos: george.hontos@ci.stcloud.mn.us, 255-1140

■ At-large, Carol Lewis: carol.lewis@ci.stcloud.mn.us, 654-8249

For more information

■ "Refugee Resettlement and Public Assistance," Stearns County Human Services Office, April 9, 2019, <https://bit.ly/2q4SOJT>.

■ "Fiscal Impact of Refugee Resettlement: An Assessment of Data Availability" by the Office of the Legislative Auditor, www.auditor.leg.state.mn.us/sreview/refugee.pdf.

■ "Immigration and Language" by the Minnesota State Demographer's Office, <https://mn.gov/admin/demography/data-by-topic/immigration-language/>.

■ "Somalis + Minnesota" — Minnesota Historical Society exhibit. Details at www.mnhs.org/historycenter/activities/museum/somalis.

■ Economic Status of Minnesotans: https://mn.gov/admin/assets/MNSDC_EconStatus_2018Report_FNL_Access.pdf_tcm36-362054.pdf

To move or stay

Sitting in her family's coffee shop, Farhiya recalled growing up with her high school classmates who bullied Somali students and older residents who yelled at her to leave.

She hears the same racist taunts in St. Cloud today.

"I have to constantly remember my identity and who I am every single time I walk out of my house," she said. "That's because I'm told to go back to my country. I'm told that I don't belong here. I'm told I shouldn't be here. I'm told I take money from the government for free. I'm told I get brand-new cars from the government. I'm told I don't pay taxes,

which is ridiculous. How do you not pay taxes in America?"

In interviews with more than a dozen members of the Somali community, many shared similar experiences, telling stories about customers hurling racial epithets at them in the grocery store, residents trying to tear off their hijabs or patrons refusing to receive services from Somali workers.

Their experiences reflect Farhiya's view that everyday encounters with discrimination remain all too common for many Somali residents. She said it's even worse for older Somali residents, especially those who can't speak English.

When she was younger, she tried to brush off insults, holding back her emotions and going on with her day. But Farhiya said it becomes harder and harder to put up with it.

Shamso Iman, Farhiya's younger sister, said her family has talked about moving away. Their mother is the only one in the family who always says no. "Our family is very close. If one moves we're all moving," she said.

That conversation has become even more challenging, Shamso said, because she sees progress in St. Cloud, like the drivers who stopped to help shovel her car out in the middle of a snowstorm or the customers who come into the coffee shop to ask questions and learn about her culture.

"For me honestly, I see a difference, a huge difference," Shamso said. "The older we get, the better it gets here."

But Farhiya wonders if that will happen in time for her and her family to stay.

"I would like to be this optimist and say 'You know what? We are going to do better and we're going to change,'" she said. "But at the same time are we going to change fast enough for us to be able to live here like everybody else?"

Coming next: *Although St. Cloud continues to wrestle with racial tensions, the city has been fertile ground for efforts aimed at combating hate. Read about how residents, community groups and some city leaders have worked to spread a more inclusive message.*



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