

Hope & Fear in Minnesota's Heartland



People gather for conversation during a Dine and Dialogue event July 20 at the St. Cloud Public Library. DAVE SCHWARZ/ST. CLOUD TIMES

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Cloud. He liked the small-town feeling, sense of community and quiet atmosphere away from a big city. It reminded him of the refugee camp in Kenya where he lived for nearly two decades.

"I don't know what it was, but I found myself feeling very at home here in St. Cloud," Abdi said. "St. Cloud is really a thriving community, and it's somewhere where I can settle and make a home. And I did."

Fadumo and Abdi have now been married for three years. Like many young families, they're hoping to buy their first house. They're moving along in their careers: Fadumo, 28, works as a labor and delivery nurse at St. Cloud Hospital and Abdi, 31, recently opened a day care. And their 1-year-old son, Maher is admittedly a little spoiled by his adoring grandparents.

Fadumo and Abdi's story represents part of a growing Somali community that's settled in St. Cloud — started families, opened businesses, participated in civic life — and in doing so, changed the city's landscape.

A majority of Somali-Minnesotans have now lived in the state for at least a decade; a growing number were born in the U.S., like Maher. Some have run for public office, including Abdi, who mounted an unsuccessful campaign for city council in 2016. Many in St. Cloud say they aren't going anywhere.

"We're going to live in St. Cloud for a while," Fadumo said. "We're not moving."

St. Cloud, however, has developed a reputation for its less-than-welcoming reception of immigrants and refugees from East Africa — fueling tensions that have caused some to leave, saying hate has "poisoned" the city they once called home.

The city has been labeled the "worst place in Minnesota to be Somali" and the "epicenter of Islamophobia," monikers that harken back to the area's longtime nickname, "White Cloud," a reference to its history as a white enclave.

Yet for Abdi and many other residents, that's not the full story.

"In St. Cloud there are so many things that are positive that are happening," he said. "I wouldn't settle here if that kind of hate existed. I wouldn't settle here and have a son here. I wouldn't build a business."

Ahmed Ali, a Somali community organizer, echoed that view, calling St. Cloud a city with two sides.

"I have seen the good St. Cloud. I have seen people who have been welcoming, who have invited me to their spaces, to their homes, their offices," he said. "And I have seen the negative St. Cloud: the name-calling, insulting, demeaning."

Several community leaders like Ali said the negative side of St. Cloud gets more attention than efforts to unite the community. But as residents, community groups and some city leaders work to spread a more welcoming and inclusive message, they believe the city can be known for something else.

Although the city continues to wrestle with racial tensions, St. Cloud has also been fertile ground for efforts aimed at combating hate. And many people — from longtime white residents to new Somali refugees — express profound



"That's where the change is going to happen for us — through conversations. I just feel like our humanity connects us more than it divides us."

Fadumo Hassan, above. PHOTO BY ZACH DWYER/ST. CLOUD TIMES

hope that St. Cloud will work through the conflict that's plagued the city for the past decade.

For Fadumo, it's important that people see all the good throughout the city. She thinks of her daily work at the hospital, like when new parents thank her for helping deliver their newborn child.

"In my experience, the positive outweighs the negative," she said.

'I'm hoping maybe I can help...'

Paula Tift spent a Saturday afternoon in July at the St. Cloud Library — just across the street from the spot Abdi and Fadumo had their first date — eating

sambusas, drinking Somali tea and discussing how she could make the community more inclusive.

Tift was one of more than 100 people who attended Dine and Dialogue, a bi-monthly event aimed at fostering understanding started by a local college instructor. It was Tift's first time at the discussion.

"I want to learn how to speak to my friends who maybe are less than welcoming," said Tift. "There's just so much misunderstanding, and I'm hoping maybe I can help with that — do my little part."

Dine and Dialogue is a source of hope for many residents who say there's a

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.

need for more conversations and community-building. It's among a number of efforts in St. Cloud to counter hate, some dating back more than a decade.

A few years ago, residents organized #UniteCloud, a nonprofit advocacy group that aims to counter racial, religious and cultural tensions in the area. The group runs anti-bias training across the state, offers speakers for conferences and events, and shares pro-refugee, pro-immigrant messages on social media.

Individual residents, including many in the Somali community, have taken an active role seeking out others, fostering conversations and building relationships with those more skeptical about the influx of immigrants.

Churches, schools and community groups have routinely hosted workshops, panels and Q&A events, provid-

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Mayor Dave Kleis greets guests at his home for one of his "Dinner With Strangers" events July 23 in St. Cloud. Every month, the mayor invites a group of citizens to his home for food and conversation. DAVE SCHWARZ/ST. CLOUD TIMES