

Hope & Fear in Minnesota's Heartland



DAVE SCHWARZ/ST. CLOUD TIMES

Optimism

Continued from Page 4A

ing spaces for residents to listen, ask questions and learn about people who are Muslim.

Religious leaders have taken a vocal role advocating for refugees and supporting the Muslim community. The Catholic Diocese of St. Cloud started an interfaith dialogue to build bridges between Christians, Muslims and other faith communities. Several Lutheran churches have hosted a “My Neighbor is Muslim” education series.

The Islamic Center of St. Cloud, which runs a mosque in the heart of the Lake George neighborhood, has developed a tight relationship with the local neighborhood association. The two organizations have paired up to host iftars, community events and an annual Heritage Dinner which promotes cultural exchange.

Mayor Dave Kleis invites seven strangers to his home for monthly dinners focused on conversation and relationship-building. Create CommUNITY, the mayor's longstanding initiative to address racial issues, has sought to empower local business, government and community leaders.

Recently, when a group of conservative activists protested a hate crime panel in September, hundreds more turned up for the Community Pride and Peace Walk — walking to Lake George singing songs and carrying signs promoting love and unity.

At the library, attendees at Dine and Dialogue split into groups of about 10. In the circles, participants offered perspectives about shared values, discussing diversity and what they could do to foster a more inclusive community.

One group encompassed a wide swath of the community including a local pastor, a new father, an East African elder, a retiree, public school and college administrators and a young Somali student attending St. Cloud State University.

The meetings are hosted by Hudda Ibrahim, a diversity and social justice instructor at St. Cloud Technical & Community College and the author of “From Somalia to Snow: How Central Minnesota Became Home to Somalis.”

Ibrahim has lived St. Cloud since 2006. She and her husband, Abdi Mahad, started Dine and Dialogue a few years ago. It's since grown to host hundreds of people and gain publicity across the state.

“No matter where you go you will find individuals who are close-minded, who might not want to have a conversation with their neighbors,” Ibrahim said. “I choose to reach to people who might not know about my culture, but are willing to have conversations with me.”

Ibrahim sees progress in the growing number of people coming to the dialogues, even though it hasn't always been easy.

“There are times when we feel like it's really tiring to feel like we are the only ones reaching out. But at this time there

**“If they know you, they won't fear you.
So give them the opportunity to know you.”**

Jama Alimad, above, speaks during a Dine and Dialogue event at the St. Cloud Public Library.



Hudda Ibrahim and St. Cloud Mayor Dave Kleis speak following a Dine and Dialogue event July 20 at the St. Cloud Public Library. DAVE SCHWARZ/ST. CLOUD TIMES

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

are people reaching back,” she said. “This work cannot be done by a Somali-American individual or just one person... it has to be a collective effort.”

‘We have friends. We have allies’

In June, an unknown man walked into the Central Minnesota Islamic Center with a dog, causing fear and confusion among members of the St. Cloud mosque.

A video shows the man pulling hair off the dog and throwing it on the floor — a gesture believed to play upon the stereotype that Muslims don't like dogs.

The incident drew a police investigation and calls from the Minnesota Council on American-Islamic Relations to look at whether it involved bias. The mosque has been the target of vandalism in recent years.

But Jama Alimad, a Somali community elder, says the incident revealed something more hopeful: the community's response. Around 30 or 40 people showed up to the mosque after the incident to show solidarity, he said.

“We have friends. We have allies. We have people who are coming right away to tell you they are sorry about this,” Alimad said.

The Rev. Dee Pederson, a longtime pastor at Bethlehem Lutheran Church who recently took a synod position with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, was one of those who showed up to support the mosque. She's long advocated for accepting refugees in her congregation.

“This is a community that has been built by people working together for the spirit of welcoming and respect and opportunity,” she said. “And we're just not going to stop.”

Like many community leaders, Alimad says he sees more people stepping up to support the Somali community than when he moved to St. Cloud in the early 2000s. However, he says, those who support refugees need to expand the conversation.

“You have to go out of your comfort zone, out of the zone of people you know,” he said. “To work with people who have different opinions and different ideas... Those are the people I want to have contact with.”

For Alimad, it's a strategy based on a simple premise: building relationships. “If they know you, they won't fear you. So give them the opportunity to know you,” he said.

It's the same approach Fadumo Hassan has gone forward with since coming to St. Cloud five years ago.

She says that many people still don't know how to feel about Muslim and Somali residents. That can be solved, she said, with more opportunities for people to talk, ask questions and share their stories.

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

Coming next: *With work, patience and time, are efforts to counter hate in St. Cloud working?*