

Hope & Fear in Minnesota's Heartland



DAVE SCHWARZ/ST. CLOUD TIMES

Change

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fear is involved in any culture it does an injustice. And not knowing — you develop a fear.”

Linda was among those who vigorously opposed the city's rapid changes. “I don't think I liked it any more than anyone else,” she said.

But five or six years ago, Linda's perspective started to change.

Prompted in large part by difficult conversations with her family, budding friendships with Muslim residents and her Christian faith, Linda said she's embraced a more welcoming view of her Somali neighbors.

“I knew that wasn't right. I knew something in me had to change,” she said.

Linda's daughter, Samantha Grimsley, works in St. Cloud for a Christian nonprofit organization that helps settle refugees. She remembers struggling to push back against her mother's concerns about the area's growing refugee community.

After one particularly bad argument, Grimsley said, her husband gave Linda a challenge: Get to know one of her Muslim neighbors. Linda took him up on it.

She started tutoring Somali students at Talahi Community School and then St. Cloud Technical and Community College. She baked cookies for the Muslim family who moved in a few doors down. And she got a taste for sambusas, even if they aren't the most healthy snack.

Slowly — and at times, painfully slow for her daughter — Linda realized her at-

titudes toward new East African residents didn't match up with her Christian values.

“I know what Jesus wants us to do. I know how he wants us to treat people,” she said. “Reading the [Bible] over and over, it says love our neighbors. Because they are our neighbors. Heck, they live three blocks away.”

Linda now teaches English to new immigrants at an apartment building and runs a sewing class for refugee women on Monday afternoons.

In May, Linda was among hundreds to attend a community iftar at the Islamic Center of St. Cloud inside the same building where she went to kindergarten and later attended church services. The Islamic Center converted the space, formerly Garfield Elementary School and later a church, into a mosque in 2015.

However, Linda also sees many of her friends holding on to the same views she used to, echoing concerns about Muslims taking over or imposing sharia law in St. Cloud.

Linda tries to give people the same advice she received: Get to know someone. “I keep telling other people, friends, to step out in faith just once,” she said. “Sometimes it's many conversations,

it's many different interactions before someone does take that step.”

Little by little, Linda sees her influence wearing off on some friends, who now try to smile at Somali residents in public. Other friends, however, have stuck to their views; some just stopped discussing refugees around her.

But Linda said she understands it takes more time for some people. She remembers how long it took her to accept a more welcoming view.

“I look at it and I think: Am I embarrassed that I was like that? No. Do I wish I could have been more accepting earlier? Yes. But it takes time to change,” she said. “And change is a difficult thing.”

Moving the needle

Those leading efforts to counter anti-refugee and anti-Muslim tensions say they have seen people who have undergone a change of heart and adopted a more welcoming stance.

But after years of efforts — and more than a decade of tension over the city's growing Somali community — advocates admit effecting change can be frustrating. Progress can happen, they say, but it takes work, patience and time.

“We have a hate issue. We have deeply [troubling] things going on in our community. But these are individuals. These are minorities. It's not the majority of St. Cloud.”

Ekram Elmoge, above, St. Cloud State University senior

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.

One of the most prominent efforts taking on this work is #UniteCloud. The community group has amassed a strong grassroots following in recent years, rallying residents around a pro-refugee, pro-immigrant agenda. Hundreds of the group's red-and-navy “Love Your Neighbor” lawn signs line streets, and thousands more people follow the group on social media.

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A sign distributed by #UniteCloud is pictured in this file photo.
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People talk before the start of a Dine and Dialogue event July 20 at the St. Cloud Public Library.

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