

BRAINERD DISPATCH

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Photos by Kelly Humphrey / Brainerd Dispatch

People hold signs to rally for Brainerd School District leadership Thursday, June 4, along Washington Street in Brainerd near the intersection with South Sixth Street. The rally was originally meant to call for the termination of a teacher over social media posts she made that many deemed racist. The teacher in question submitted her resignation earlier in the day and Superintendent Laine Larson recommended the school board accept the resignation.

Forestview teacher accused of racist comments resigns, apologizes



Shannon Porter (center) and her daughter Liberty hold signs Thursday, June 4, during a rally to support Brainerd School District leadership at the intersection of Washington and South Sixth streets in Brainerd.

Rally thanks district for taking action

By Theresa Bourke and Gabriel Lagarde
Staff Writers

Forestview Middle School teacher Kara Hall resigned Wednesday, June 3, after widespread concern over social media statements many deemed racist. The comments came on a Facebook post shared by a former lakes area resident

detailing her experience among protesters in Minneapolis, following the death of George Floyd in police custody May 25.

Comments included: "I know all I see are scary awful blacks people robbing businesses that don't deserve this."

Another comment from Hall criticizing Minneapolis Mayor Jacob Frey and calling for law and order to be restored included: "The creepy, destructive, violent blacks we are all across America watching raid

TEACHER: Page A11

Memorial for George Floyd raises hope for change

By Matthew Stolle
Forum News Service

MINNEAPOLIS — George Floyd died after a Minneapolis police officer pressed his knee against his neck for eight minutes and 46 seconds.

46-year-old Minneapolis man, whose manner of death has become a symbol of the brutal, unequal treatment blacks sometimes receive at the hands of police, black leaders

At a memorial for the **MEMORIAL:** Page A7



Traci Westcott / Forum News Service

George Floyd's casket is carried out to the hearse after a family memorial service on Thursday, June 4, 2020, outside Frank J. Lindquist Sanctuary at North Central University in Minneapolis.

Local lawmakers give their take on protests and riots

By Gabriel Lagarde
Staff Writer

In a matter of days, the death of George Floyd turned Minneapolis upside down and prompted an international wave of protests and riots — seismic events that garnered both sympathy and condemnation from local GOP lawmakers in central Minnesota.

In a phone interview Thursday, June 4, Minnesota Senate Majority Leader Paul Gazelka, R-Nisswa, confirmed he reached out to the White House Friday, May 29, in an attempt to enlist President Donald Trump's intervention in Minnesota. He said his decision came after rioters burned the Minneapolis Police Department's Third Precinct

and more than 170 buildings were destroyed throughout the Twin Cities metro in a matter of days.

"If the governor is not going to do anything, I want to reach out to the White House," said Gazelka, who noted Gov. Tim Walz also reached out to federal authorities for aid.

LAWMAKERS: Page A7

Todd County reports 1st coronavirus death

Todd County, the area county experiencing the highest number of laboratory-confirmed COVID-19 cases, recorded its first death due to the disease Thursday, June 4.

It also added six new cases for a total of 336. This means the county has 136 cases per 10,000 residents. A number of the cases in Todd County are associated with an out-

break first reported in late May at Long Prairie Packing Co., a beef processing facility in Long Prairie that employs about 630 people.

Also seeing new cases Thursday were Crow Wing County with two and Mille Lacs County with one case. Cass County's figures were adjusted down again as a case was reassigned to a different county. That county now stands at 11

total cases after at one point reporting 14. Cass has the lowest rate of cases per 10,000 residents of seven area counties, with 3.69.

Changes to Crow Wing County's statistics include one more infected health care worker for a total of 13 residents who work in health care, and one more long-term care resident for a total of 26.

Data as of June 4

- ▶ Aitkin — 11.
- ▶ Cass — 11, with two deaths.
- ▶ Crow Wing — 76, with four deaths.
- ▶ Mille Lacs — 23, with one death.
- ▶ Morrison — 48.
- ▶ Todd — 336, with one death.
- ▶ Wadena — 10.

NOTE: These numbers are cumulative since March 21 and many are likely out of isolation.

The number of those no longer needing isolation is not reported on a county-level basis by the state.

Statewide

- ▶ Number of tests — 275,622.
- ▶ Total positive cases — 26,273.
- ▶ Positive health care workers — 2,851.
- ▶ Age range with greatest number of cases — 30-39 years old, with 20% of cases.

- ▶ Currently hospitalized — 512, with 244 in intensive care.
- ▶ Total cases requiring hospitalization — 3,253.
- ▶ Total deaths — 1,115.
- ▶ Deaths among those in long-term care or assisted living — 896.
- ▶ No longer needing isolation — 21,490.

Compiled from Minnesota Department of Health data and county sources.

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TEACHER

From Page A1

and ruin businesses across America need to be put in jail!"

An online petition garnering thousands of signatures sought her firing, and an open letter signed by 14 Brainerd High School graduates implored the district to take action as well.

On Thursday, Hall issued the following statement addressed to the Brainerd community and Brainerd School District:

"I am sincerely apologetic for the outrage and pain I have caused this great community by my inappropriate comments to Kali Erin Wolhart on Facebook. I have respectfully resigned from my position after teaching middle school visual arts for the past 18 years. We tell our students to think before they speak, that words matter, and what we say will have consequences. I did not practice what I preached. Ms. Wolhart is a former student with whom I have maintained a positive relationship over the years, and I am deeply saddened by the impact of this situation on that relationship.

"Like most people in America, I was horrified by the murder of George Floyd. I included that statement in her post; an important piece she neglected to share. I believe in justice and equality, and recognize this terrible act is reflective of how far we have to go to achieve that goal. The posts that were

widely shared regarding the aftermath of this unjust act did not reflect my care and concern for those most impacted. My words were terribly wrong. They were typed in a heated moment that I regret. Not because I lost a career I valued, but because it hurt community members and students for whom I have great respect and truly care about. I hope they will forgive me and give me a chance to move forward in a positive way. I want all of my students to know they mattered, and will always matter."

While Hall's comments originated on a post made by Wolhart, the Facebook post sparking the outcry and calls for Hall's firing was made by someone else, who witnessed the exchange on Wolhart's post.

District statement

Brainerd Public Schools Superintendent Laine Larson issued the following statement Thursday:

"Recent events in our community, state, and country have us all on a rollercoaster ride, which I suspect no one wanted to take. First there was the disruption of a COVID-19 global pandemic and the requirement of distance learning for all. Then the tragic death of George Floyd set in motion a series of events in the Twin Cities and the world that will take a long time to process, including the troubling personal social media activity of a Brainerd Public School District employee. I am writing today to share what we at Brainerd Public Schools are doing

to create a brighter, safer, and more just future for all.

"Last evening, Kara Hall, Forestview Middle School Art Teacher, submitted her resignation from teaching with Brainerd Public Schools, effective June 3, 2020. I am recommending the Board of Education accept this resignation at their regular meeting on Monday, June 8, 2020.

"The views she expressed on social media earlier this week are contrary to our District's mission to 'ensure all students achieve their individual potential by providing the highest-quality programs and resources to prepare learners for an ever-changing global society.' It is my expectation that every one of the over 1,200 employees at Brainerd Public Schools has a daily goal to affirm and carry out the belief that every student has an invaluable place in our organization and community.

"Brainerd Public Schools has been working systemically to create equity in all we do, from changing curriculum and instruction to training staff through research-based professional learning. We understand that there is still work to do to close gaps in learning that occur in predictable — and thus preventable — patterns according to race and socioeconomic status. This equity work remains essential and we as a school district are more committed to it than ever.

"Thank you to community and staff

members who reached out to share their concerns about the events of this week. It has been heartwarming to see such a deep commitment to making sure every single learner entrusted to us has caring teachers and staff who value them. The District is committed to taking matters seriously and acting on them in a fair and timely manner. Together, we pursue educational excellence while ensuring a safe environment."

Rallying behind the district

A group of community members who planned a rally Thursday evening to advocate for Hall's firing still rallied, but instead it was a rally of support for the school district.

The group issued a statement Thursday afternoon:

"Now we will turn that (rally) into a 'Support Brainerd School Leadership' event. Showing thank you and appreciation for their investigation and for swift action by all parties.

"We will be there with signs supporting our district, snacks, water and unity as a community making sure to be a voice for all students regardless of color.

"Miigwech Brainerd School Leadership and community members who brought this to light, supported equal treatment and vocalized their concerns. Brainerd Warriors ARE colorblind."

While turnout was understandably smaller after Hall's and Larson's statements, lakes area families gathered at the intersection of Sixth and

Washington streets to thank the district for its swift action on the issue. Freedom and Shannon Porter were among them.

"We had people ready to show up to terminate the teacher, but we also wanted the spotlight the positive from the district — they took action and they listened to the parents," Freedom Porter said. "People are quick to show the negative stuff. We just wanted to say we appreciate it, publicly, not just on Facebook. I'm sure they don't hear it a lot."

"It was a tough position (for the district)," Shannon Porter said. "They investigated, they took swift action, and because of that all the parties involved made the right decision. So we just want to say thank you to the district and the community, everybody who spoke out, wrote letters, sent Facebook messages."

Both Porters said they weren't aware of other instances of discrimination in the district — instead, they said the district proactively honored their Ojibwe heritage — but they noted their perspective is limited and they can only speak for what they've learned from Baxter Elementary School.

Kaari Weyaus, a Brainerd mother of seven, said her children could vouch for multiple occasions of outright discrimination in their schools. Two of them joined her on Washington Street, while another two stayed home for fear they might draw attention

to themselves from teachers.

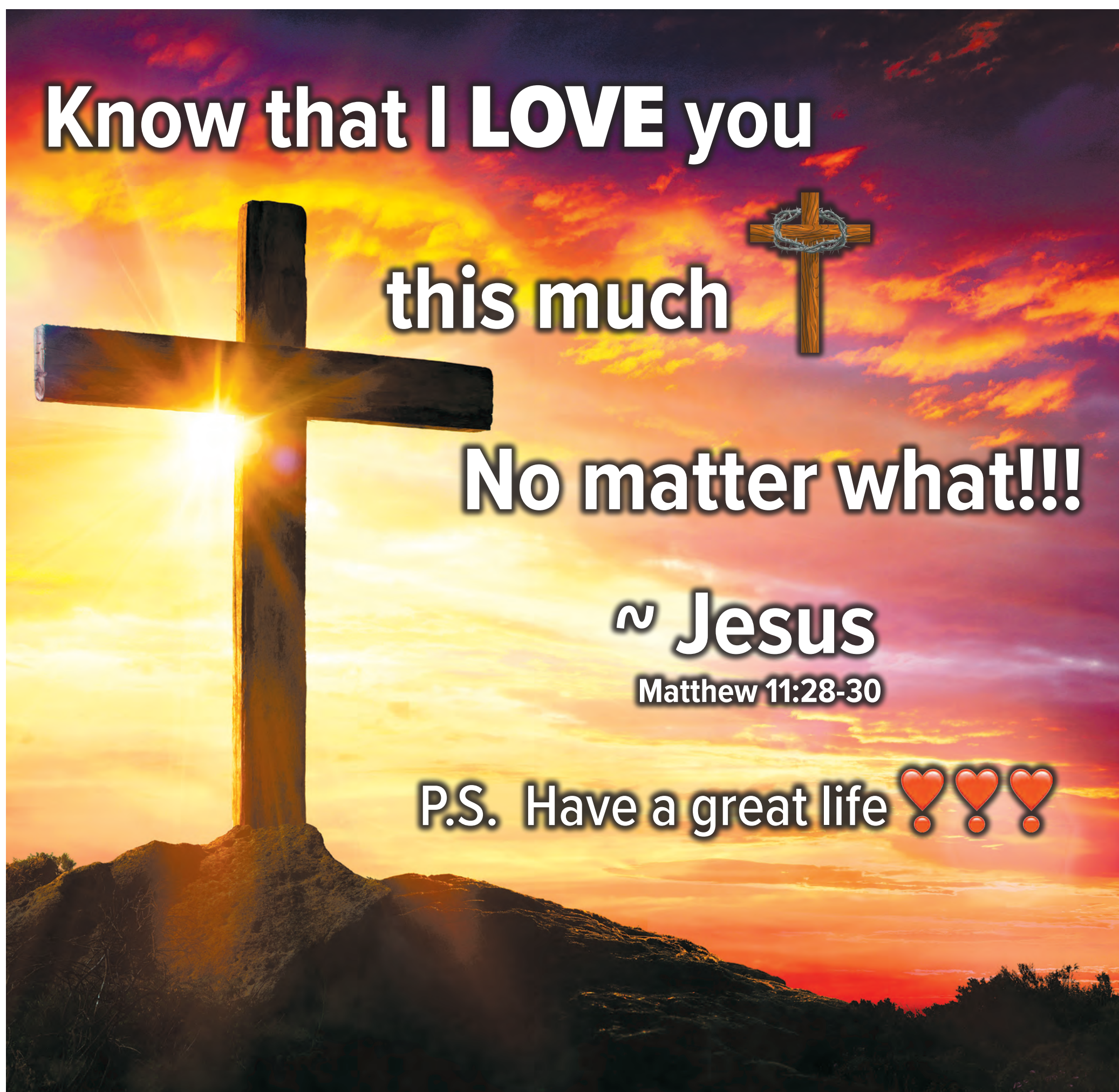
"Hopefully we can get that on the agenda with friends and neighbors who have seen racism or experienced that racism themselves, so we can compile that data on the local level," Weyaus said. "I applaud their swift action. We thought about canceling today, but I think if we're going to be against the district, we need to applaud them when they did what they needed to do."

The situation illuminated some surprising perspectives, Freedom Porter said, who pointed to interactions with a fellow parent who said they couldn't support Hall's resignation — not because they agreed with her statements, he said, but because Hall enjoyed a special and nurturing relationship with their autistic child. It highlighted just how sad the incident was all around, he said.

"I'm sure this teacher, like all teachers, has touched hundreds of lives, but it's just an unfortunate situation," Freedom Porter said. "After serving for 20 years in education, I can't help but feel bad it ended this way, despite what she said. Racism is tough. People just don't think about it. To have an educator, somebody who influences kids' minds, that's something we can't have."

Theresa Bourke may be reached at theresa.bourke@brainerddispatch.com or 218-855-5860. Follow her on Twitter at www.twitter.com/DispatchTheresa.

Gabriel Lagarde may be reached at gabe.lagarde@brainerddispatch.com or 218-855-5859. Follow at www.twitter.com/gibrddispatch.



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