
Marshall Independent

Est. 1907

Thursday, June 9, 2016

By Karin Elton , Marshall Independent

Editor's column: Reaching out to give them a voice

By Per Peterson , Marshall Independent

If you haven't done so already, be sure to read today's cover story by Karin Elton. It's good, and even more than that, it's important.

After I learned of the stabbings at a St. Cloud mall last weekend, I was depressed and angry. It's always sad when something like this happens in America, but having it happen a few hours from where you live takes it to another level.

It's scary and frustrating and makes you think.

Things take a while to process when incidents like stabbings and mass shootings - real acts of terrorism - occur. When I got a chance to sit back and take in the news from St. Cloud, plus some of the aftershocks that followed, I was reminded that we, as a news organization, have a role to play in the healing and understanding process. And it's our hope that, in some way, we can foster better relations with minorities in this community and in communities across the region with the work we do.

That should be a goal of every newspaper.

In case you haven't noticed, Marshall's population is a pretty diverse one; it is to Minnesota what Minnesota is to the United States. We have Hispanics living and working here. We have African-Americans living and working here. And, yes, we have Muslims living and working here. Marshall is its own melting pot, and that's a wonderful thing, because these people who just want a better life for themselves and their kids also

contribute to the community in many ways.

In the spirit of doing something to further pursue the aforementioned goal, I emailed Pat Thomas, who might just be the most underrated figure in the city of Marshall. Thomas is a saint. She helps more people than Goodwill. As director of Marshall's Adult Basic Education, which also has sites in Granite Falls, Jackson and Worthington, she not only works with those looking to better their lives, but she forms special bonds with them. Minorities who have been here for just a couple months and who can't speak a lick of English are drawn to her and quickly grow to trust her.

I put that trust to the test a bit earlier this week with my email asking her to set up a roundtable with some of Marshall's Somali community to get their take on what happened in St. Cloud last weekend and what exactly their lives are like in Marshall. In journalism speak, it's called localizing a story. But this one goes beyond that.

Not only did Thomas agree to give it a shot, she lined up five Somalis to talk with reporter Karin Elton. This is no small feat, considering the language barrier and other unknowns that arise when people from two very different cultures collaborate. You have to remember; these are people that used to live in war-torn areas where family members were killed right on the street for no reason. Now we're asking them to trust us strangers to do right by them.

Thursday's interview got off to somewhat of an inauspicious start. I'm not sure our Somali friends trusted us or had a clue as to what we were trying to accomplish, and they weren't exactly giddy about getting their picture taken, but after a few minutes - and a healthy dose of Thomas working to assure our new friends that we're actually trying to do good - everyone settled in and, I cautiously assumed, felt comfortable with each other.

Long story short: In my 25 years of journalism, never have I been happier with an interview session, and I wasn't even the reporter doing the story.

I don't know exactly what will come out of that story on 1A today - that's up to you and what you take away from it - but it's my hope that it serves as a reminder to the close-minded out there that whatever we label them - African Americans, Somali Americans, Native Americans - they are all Americans. Each group has its issues and its bad apples, but that doesn't make one better than the other. Remember, Caucasians have their issues and bad apples, too.

If you haven't read the story, please do so; if you have read it, go back and read it again. And when you're done, remember, these human beings deserve to be here as much as you and I do. Don't hate them. Don't be scared of them. Don't be afraid to make eye contact with them. They're good people.

Remember to be one yourself.

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