

CHAPTER 9: BUILDING A MINNESOTA BEYOND “NICE”



INTRODUCTION

As The Advocates for Human Rights interviewed individuals and held community conversations around Minnesota, participants were asked to describe what “welcome” means to them, what has made them feel welcome in Minnesota, and what barriers to welcome they have encountered.

Participants noted that while Minnesota is welcoming, the welcome does not extend very far. Newcomers face discrimination and exclusion from social networks and by extension, exclusion from the economic opportunities and political power such networks bring. People spoke about the need to be “accepted” without having to discard their identities in order to be able to live with dignity. People pointed to opportunities where long-term residents can learn about other cultures and believed such education is essential to helping foster acceptance. Participants also described the barrier that segregation creates in building networks and recognized the power of connections, whether fostered through formal programs or informal encounters, to help overcome this.

IMPORTANCE OF BEING ACCEPTED

Minnesota has become increasingly diverse over the past thirty years.¹³²⁵ Demographers predict that this trend will continue, particularly because the white population is older than the minority population.¹³²⁶ The Minnesota State Demographic Center states, “all regions will be more racially and ethnically diverse in the future than they are now.”¹³²⁷ Immigrants are a key part of this growing diversity.

As part of living in a diverse community, Minnesotans must respect each individual’s right to be free from discrimination.¹³²⁸ The Minnesota Human Rights Act and federal civil rights laws guarantee freedom from discrimination for all persons in the state based on race, religion, national origin, and other grounds.¹³²⁹

“She said, ‘You are not like the rest of them!’ And then she talked about how bad the ‘rest’ of them are.”

¹³²⁵ Minnesota State Demographic Center, 2010 Census Results: Minnesota, (accessed March 17, 2014), <http://www.demography.state.mn.us/Census2010/>.

¹³²⁶ Martha McMurry, *Minnesota Population Projections by Race and Hispanic Origin, 2005 to 2035*, Minnesota State Demographic Center, January 2009, <http://www.demography.state.mn.us/documents/MinnesotaPopulationProjectionsbyRaceandHispanicOrigin2005to2035.pdf>.

¹³²⁷ Martha McMurry, *Minnesota Population Projections by Race and Hispanic Origin, 2005 to 2035*, Minnesota State Demographic Center, January 2009, <http://www.demography.state.mn.us/documents/MinnesotaPopulationProjectionsbyRaceandHispanicOrigin2005to2035.pdf>.

¹³²⁸ UDHR Art. 2.

¹³²⁹ Minn. Stat. 363A.02 Subd. 1.

These legal provisions recognize the importance of being accepted into society without needing to change one’s race, religion, color, creed, national origin, sex, marital status, disability, age, sexual orientation, or other key characteristic.

Despite this recognition, numerous people reported experiences of discriminatory treatment by others. One man said, “I look different and the first thing people would ask is ‘where are you from?’ and ‘why did you come here?’”¹³³⁰ A student reported going to the college writing center: “We talked for a long time and then she detected [that I was an immigrant] and she said, ‘Oh, your writing is so good though! You are not like the rest of them!’ And then she talked about how bad the ‘rest’ of them are.”¹³³¹ Another man who ran an ice-cream truck reported numerous people telling him to “go back to Africa.”¹³³² Another woman said, “When I go out and my head is covered, people look at me in a weird way. They are all nice and friendly to the person ahead of me in the checkout line but when I get to the checkout, their demeanor changes. It is like they are not supposed to be nice and friendly or they are afraid to be nice and friendly. It might be either way.”¹³³³ One man noted racism especially towards Somali and Muslim immigrants: “People tie what is happening outside of the borders to people here.”¹³³⁴

Service providers reported that clients experienced discrimination, even if the clients could not precisely articulate the experience. Talking about newly arrived refugees, one service provider explained: “It’s the ‘honeymoon’ period. They are so new they may not have conceptualized it yet. It would take about twenty-four months to understand the discrimination. They are not trained to think that way.”¹³³⁵ A refugee woman reported an African-American neighbor told her, “The farther you go into the system, the more you meet up with discrimination.”¹³³⁶

Being accepted is critical to inclusion and belonging. While, at a minimum, acceptance means not facing discrimination because of immutable traits,¹³³⁷ it also means ensuring that differences in language, culture, dress, religion, and other experiences are acknowledged, valued, and included in the community. A man said, “You want to be accepted, you need to be accepted, you need people to be tolerant of your mistakes and to accept all of you.”¹³³⁸ Others observed that “acceptance of

¹³³⁰ Interview 3.

¹³³¹ Conversation 19.

¹³³² Conversation 21.

¹³³³ Interview 18.

¹³³⁴ Interview 143.

¹³³⁵ Interview 115.

¹³³⁶ Interview 129.

¹³³⁷ UDHR Art. 2.

¹³³⁸ Interview 5.

different viewpoints and cultures,”¹³³⁹ “being accepted and understood,”¹³⁴⁰ or having “people take an active interest in learning about new neighbors and getting to know someone,”¹³⁴¹ are signs of acceptance. “Being accepted for who you are,”¹³⁴² being “respectful of your lifestyle,”¹³⁴³ and “having a sense of belonging”¹³⁴⁴ are key to feeling included in the community. As one interviewer said, “It honestly means that you can be yourself, and that self will be accepted. It means feeling like home.”¹³⁴⁵

Many of the immigrants interviewed for the project cited “being accepted” as an area where Minnesota can continue to improve.¹³⁴⁶ A human rights commissioner expressed the need for communities to “go beyond tolerance to acceptance.”¹³⁴⁷ In another community, one woman depicted the current attitude as “you have to play by our rules, but you are welcome if you do. It is tolerance as opposed to acceptance.”¹³⁴⁸ An English language teacher expressed frustration with how closed her community is, saying, “It is hard to get acceptance of new refugees.”¹³⁴⁹ Others noted that acceptance was “not quite there.”¹³⁵⁰ An immigrant observed that “they just need to accept differences and not point them out as something weird. I remember when I first came here with my strong accent, people would always ask questions. So just knowing that somebody who looks different from you is not a bad person helps.”¹³⁵¹ The cost of excluding people from the community can be high. One community advocate noted, “When kids do not feel accepted, they join gangs.”¹³⁵²

¹³³⁹ Interview 40.

¹³⁴⁰ Interview 42.

¹³⁴¹ Interview 111.

¹³⁴² Interview 21 (“To be welcomed is to be accepted for who you are and people being respectful of your lifestyle.”); Interview 54 (“I feel that you are accepted for who you are as an individual.”).

¹³⁴³ Interview 47 (“I would define a welcoming state as accepting any race/gender.”).

¹³⁴⁴ Interview 7 (“To me, feeling welcome means being safe, feeling accepted ...”); Interview 11 (“I think a place that is welcoming is accepting, non-judgmental, fair no matter who you are.”); Interview 113 (“More open and acceptable, more inclusive.”); Interview 115; Interview 134 (“I established relationships based on business; over the years I was seen differently and was more accepted.”); Interview 137 (“Being accepting of languages, people of different colors.”).

¹³⁴⁵ Interview 46.

¹³⁴⁶ Conversation 7; Conversation 16.

¹³⁴⁷ Interview 88.

¹³⁴⁸ Interview 79.

¹³⁴⁹ Interview 100.

¹³⁵⁰ Interview 44 (“Being a state in the Midwest, I don’t think acceptance is fully there.”).

¹³⁵¹ Interview 50.

¹³⁵² Interview 136.

An important step towards acceptance is educating receiving communities about immigrant groups and their experiences.¹³⁵³ One interviewee remarked, “Welcoming includes outreach, education, and sensitivity to culture and language. It is not just wanting diversity but also having a deeper understanding of peoples’ stories.”¹³⁵⁴ A service provider recalled a presentation for agency employees about Burmese refugees. She said, “It was a cultural orientation for us, and it was very helpful. We need more programs like that.”¹³⁵⁵

“It honestly means that you can be yourself, and that self will be accepted. It means feeling like home.”

One person recommended that groups “start at the community level to create cultural awareness and exchange.”¹³⁵⁶ Communities cited annual cultural festivals as one way to bring groups together and promote cross-cultural learning.¹³⁵⁷ In one town, the welcoming initiative and the school collaborated on a

public art project.¹³⁵⁸ The students painted chairs to represent the heritage of town residents, and the chairs are displayed throughout the central business district.¹³⁵⁹

Multiple community conversation participants agreed that people with previous exposure to diversity are less likely to be offensive towards immigrants.¹³⁶⁰ A man suggested people need to learn more about different cultures besides U.S. culture.¹³⁶¹ Another person acknowledged the need to “be more involved and open-minded. That is easier said than done. It takes education at a young age to learn acceptance. It takes knowledge and education to learn acceptance at an older age. It takes exposure to different situations.”¹³⁶² Participants in one conversation noted that people who have traveled and had diverse experiences are much more receptive and welcoming towards a diverse community.¹³⁶³ A group at another conversation emphasized, “We need to educate people about the benefits of increased diversity, so people learn immigration is benefitting their community.”¹³⁶⁴

¹³⁵³ Interview 80; Conversation 2; Conversation 7; Conversation 12; Conversation 16; Conversation 20.

¹³⁵⁴ Interview 115.

¹³⁵⁵ Interview 81.

¹³⁵⁶ Interview 43.

¹³⁵⁷ Conversation 7 (“Cinco de Mayo, Oktoberfest”); Interview 79; Interview 90; Conversation 2; Conversation 9.

¹³⁵⁸ Interview 90.

¹³⁵⁹ Interview 90.

¹³⁶⁰ Conversation 12.

¹³⁶¹ Interview 6.

¹³⁶² Interview 46.

¹³⁶³ Conversation 9.

¹³⁶⁴ Conversation 7; Conversation 24.

MINNESOTA BEYOND “NICE”

Acceptance increases when there is greater empathy and understanding towards immigrants in the community.¹³⁶⁵ A young woman said Minnesota could be more welcoming if people better understood the situation of many immigrants and “put themselves in that situation and knew how hard that transition is.”¹³⁶⁶ One man said, “The English-only community does not understand the immigrant experience.”¹³⁶⁷ An immigrant explained that people need to be more informed and sensitive towards immigrants, for example by not asking questions like “aren’t you hot in there?” to women wearing headscarves.¹³⁶⁸

“People try to help you, but they try not to be your friend.”

Conversation participants acknowledged that reaching out and stepping into unfamiliar situations can be difficult.¹³⁶⁹ One person recommended that everyone “talk with others in spite of our fear.”¹³⁷⁰ Another group felt that it was important to “promote going out of one’s comfort zone.”¹³⁷¹ A participant said listening and seeing someone face-to-face are both vital to building a connection, even though “you do not always feel comfortable, but that is part of it.”¹³⁷² A school employee explained, “Relationship is the key to change. It’s all about creating relationships.”¹³⁷³ The relationships between people and groups help foster trust, overcome stumbling blocks, and can last for many years.¹³⁷⁴

NEED TO GO BEYOND “MINNESOTA NICE”

While participants reported feeling that Minnesotans were welcoming, even more so than people in other states,¹³⁷⁵ many people felt it was a shallow welcome. As one person observed, “people try to help you, but they try not to be your friend.”¹³⁷⁶

Another observed that “everybody from different states, different countries, they live here, so Minnesota is very welcoming, but making friends is very hard in Minnesota. Every race moves together, Somali you find that group, Hispanic, African, African-American, Caucasian, Native

¹³⁶⁵ Conversation 7; Conversation 21.

¹³⁶⁶ Interview 44.

¹³⁶⁷ Conversation 6.

¹³⁶⁸ Interview 18.

¹³⁶⁹ Conversation 22.

¹³⁷⁰ Conversation 7.

¹³⁷¹ Conversation 9; Conversation 24.

¹³⁷² Conversation 11.

¹³⁷³ Interview 120.

¹³⁷⁴ Conversation 11.

¹³⁷⁵ Interview 1; Interview 7; Interview 14; Interview 18; Interview 31; Conversation 8; Conversation 21.

¹³⁷⁶ Interview 4.

American. It is hard to make friends of different races. Most of your friends are where you are from.”¹³⁷⁷

Many interviews and conversations noted that “people do not step out of their groups.”¹³⁷⁸ A group of students said, “People are very guarded. People are nice, but it doesn’t get past a certain point. People are polite, but they aren’t necessarily open.”¹³⁷⁹ Others cited challenges deciphering the communication style.¹³⁸⁰ “People will tend to say things that may be different than what they are feeling in order not to offend. But people tell me that it is a ‘Minnesotan thing.’ I find this to be very frustrating.”¹³⁸¹

The absence of deeper relationships between immigrant communities and long-term resident groups results in the exclusion of immigrants from the community. This is often unintentional, which means it requires a concerted effort by government, institutions, and organizations to ensure they are making efforts to include all residents.

Minnesota’s climate of surface-level welcome, rather than full acceptance and belonging, can negatively affect some newcomers’ abilities to succeed. A transplant from another state said, “Because people in Minnesota seem to stay in the same community, the ‘networks’ are more closed – it can be harder to get a job.”¹³⁸² One student expressed frustration in trying to engage in the civic life: “Having a connection helps, but getting past a certain point depends on who you know. A lot of stuff is underground, you have to look for it, people do not want to advertise. You only get to know about things if you already know people.”¹³⁸³ Another man observed, “It is difficult to figure out how people socialize and form relationships. I think more information about the cultural setting would help.”¹³⁸⁴ Excluding immigrants from the tight-knit networks in Minnesota communities undermines their ability to fulfill other fundamental rights, such as accessing employment, housing, and participation in civic life. If access to jobs and other opportunities depends on referrals, the polarization of long-term resident groups and immigrant groups carries tremendous implications of exclusion.

¹³⁷⁷ Interview 6.

¹³⁷⁸ Conversation 16.

¹³⁷⁹ Conversation 5.

¹³⁸⁰ Conversation 13.

¹³⁸¹ Interview 7; Conversation 13.

¹³⁸² Conversation 22.

¹³⁸³ Conversation 5.

¹³⁸⁴ Conversation 15.

POWER OF CONNECTIONS

People who are strongly connected to their community feel more included and have greater success fulfilling their basic needs. Reaching out and offering connection to newcomers is a best practice for creating an inclusive community that avoids human rights violations associated with discrimination. One person suggested that people “learn each other’s culture at the individual level.”¹³⁸⁵ A group of women said, “a common theme is it does not matter where we travel, when someone outside your community welcomes you, it’s really special – a church community, a close friend, or a neighbor.”¹³⁸⁶ Many interviewees described similar positive welcoming experiences that involved small kindnesses from individuals.¹³⁸⁷

One community created “community connectors” as part of a school-based integration collaborative. These individuals field calls from community members about a wide range of questions and concerns and serve as the go-between for the person and the government office or service provider. The connectors are bilingual, and from the ethnic community they represent. Part of the success of these connectors is a strong emphasis on confidentiality. As one put it, “I don’t even share this information with my wife.” A second part of the success is the connectors’ availability, receiving calls at home and on cell phones at all hours. The program’s philosophy is to make sure people who reach out get *something* in return. “We started by building trust, making people feel comfortable. Whoever walks in, we will take care of him and figure out what he needs. It does not matter if they speak the language or not.” This system works well in part because the community is small and the community connectors know the people at the relevant agencies, churches, and government offices so they can make calls that make things happen.

Many people identified their church as a welcoming place.¹³⁸⁸ One woman said she went to church the day after she arrived and a couple there gave her “the most welcoming hug ever” which stuck with her.¹³⁸⁹ A man said that his community church was a very important resource which “made it feel more like back home.”¹³⁹⁰ Another man explained, “I was able to be involved with the community, learn more culture, and be more accepted. People like when you get involved. My church really has been life changing. I know lot of people because of that.”¹³⁹¹

¹³⁸⁵ Conversation 21.

¹³⁸⁶ Conversation 19.

¹³⁸⁷ Conversation 11; Conversation 12; Conversation 21; Conversation 22.

¹³⁸⁸ Conversation 16; Conversation 21; Conversation 22.

¹³⁸⁹ Conversation 21.

¹³⁹⁰ Interview 2.

¹³⁹¹ Interview 3.

Because of the central role that faith and religion play for many immigrants as a basis of community, social services interested in reaching immigrants should consider connecting with religious institutions and leaders. A refugee who serves as a lay pastor explained, “For organizations who want to reach immigrants, they should reach out to churches because there are very strong connections between pastors and members. There is more infighting in national-based organizations, but less in church. The trust is thicker in church.”¹³⁹² Another social service provider emphasized that undocumented immigrants may trust their church more than any other institution.¹³⁹³ A group of English language students highlighted an example of interfaith connection: “Reunions are taking place in some mosques where people from different religions and cultures get together, have dinner, and talk about different things, such as traditions and what makes their culture different than others. They talk about peace among all people and how to leave differences behind so people can get along.”¹³⁹⁴

While community programs can foster relationships, powerful connections also happen informally every day that can transform how people experience their new communities. One man related the difference a stranger made for him, changing his thoughts about American people and helping him feel like less of an outsider:

*I was at the Mall of America with my two children around Christmastime two years ago. I’m not comfortable speaking English, but I can be understood at a slower pace. And I was really struggling to find a store to get my kids things. So I stopped a mall security guard to ask him if he could help me out. The security guard then asked me what I was looking for, in Spanish. We began to have a conversation, and it struck me that this guy was not Hispanic, yet fluently spoke Spanish. I asked how he learned the language, and he said he was a Spanish major in college right now. Then the security guard told me he would be able to help me on his lunch break. The security guard then took me and my two girls around the Mall through the back doors because the crowds were so thick with people. He took us to stores for the girls to pick out things they wanted. When it was time for him to go back to work, we shared a goodbye conversation and then never saw each other again. But this was one of the nicest things anyone had done for me. And it made me feel very welcome.*¹³⁹⁵

¹³⁹² Interview 5.

¹³⁹³ Interview 137.

¹³⁹⁴ Conversation 8.

¹³⁹⁵ Interview 49.