

The House on 6th Street (B)

Shortly after the news story about the vandalism and graffiti at the house on 6th Street, phone calls began streaming in to the Islamic Center of Cedar Rapids and the Mother Mosque. Callers, most of them local, offered their apologies and affirmed that the hateful words scrawled across the walls of the Mohamoud home didn't represent their views about the Muslim community. A member of a local Unitarian Universalist church established a GoFundMe account to help fund necessary repairs. Rev. Clint Twedt-Ball reached out directly to Miriam Amer and Tigani Mohamoud to see how he and his organization, Matthew 25, might be of assistance.

Meanwhile, Michelle Stafford was overwhelmed by the response she received to her simple Facebook post: "Let's do something." Stafford's friend Lori Carlson, who was also a colleague at the local alternative healing center, offered to help. Together, they envisioned a public event to show love and support for the family. In order for it to receive media coverage, they recognized that they needed to act quickly before the news cycle moved on. Stafford contacted Miriam Amer of CAIR-Iowa, whose name was mentioned in one of the news stories about the vandalism, and explained their plan. Amer responded enthusiastically, and soon confirmed that Tigani Mohamoud and his wife Fatima would also attend. They asked, however, that the event not be held at the vandalized house. Amer explains, "Fatima was frightened, she did not want to go anywhere near that house after the graffiti. She was scared to death."¹ Instead, they would gather in a nearby park.

There was no time to seek permits. They would not serve food, as it was Ramadan and many people in the Muslim community would be fasting. They contacted the media and began posting flyers in the neighborhood near Mohamoud's house. Carlson reflects, "It wasn't a lot of work. A few flyers, walking around for an afternoon."² Within days of the vandalism, the event would take place on a warm summer evening.

Putting it together so quickly, Stafford worried if anyone would come. Imam Taha Tawil from the Mother Mosque was out of town; it was the summer, and many people were traveling. Yet as they began to set up, people started arriving: neighbors, news crews, the police chief, Miriam Amer and the Mohamoud family. Rev. Twedt-Ball, together with a group of United Methodist pastors, also joined the event. More than one hundred people gathered together in the park. Stafford recalls: "I bought six poster boards and I wanted everybody to write a message of peace and love on there. The idea was to give it to Tigani and his family so they could take it to the house and put it up over the vandalism. So those were all filled, every single space was filled."³

When Stafford scanned the crowd, she noticed two men carrying large signs reading: "Jesus Saves." As she wondered how to respond, she saw that Carlson had already walked over to them. Carlson wasn't sure about their intentions, but recalled that she knew just what to do. She greeted them and said: "I'm so glad you came. Jesus is certainly welcome... Can I give you a hug?" After the embrace, Carlson returned to the event, and didn't see the signs again.

The group gathered together in a circle and Stafford, Twedt-Ball, the police chief, and Amer were among those who spoke. At the end, Tigani Mohamoud offered thanks, and his wife Fatima, who was with their small child, added a few words. Stafford recalls: "It was one sentence, but it was the most powerful part of the whole time. And she said: 'Before I was afraid. And I'm not afraid anymore.'"

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Miriam Amer explains that the Mohamoud family was “overwhelmed” by the event. “[Tigani] was like, ‘Why, why are they doing this for me?’ He was stunned; he is still stunned. He doesn’t know how to thank them.” As for Fatima, “She was in tears, she was so happy at the response that people were giving them, and just the love that was there.... And that’s what it was: just love. So many wonderful people saying, ‘We are not represented by these idiots who did this. We want you to know that this is not us.’” Amer added, “For every one bad person, there are 100 good.”

While the Cedar Rapids police investigated the incident as a potential hate crime, they did not find those responsible for the graffiti and vandalism. Since the rally, Twedt-Ball and Mohamoud have been working together to find solutions for the house on 6th Street. They determined that the house is not salvageable: it is beyond the threshold of value versus repair, so the city will not issue permits. One year later, it seems that the best path forward will be to demolish the house and sell the property. While the next steps aren’t clear, Twedt-Ball appreciates the ways in which people in Cedar Rapids continue to help each other, whether by volunteering to repair a home or attending a rally. When looking back at the event in the park, he warmly remembers how “...people of a variety of backgrounds came together to stand up to hate and discrimination in a peaceful way. It was beautiful.”⁴

¹ All quotes by Miriam Amer: Miriam Amer, interviews by author July 7, 2015 (phone) and in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, July 31, 2015.

² All quotes by Lori Carlson: Lori Carlson, interview by author, Cedar Rapids, Iowa, July 30, 2015.

³ All quotes by Michelle Stafford: Michelle Stafford, interview by author, Cedar Rapids, Iowa, July 30, 2015.

⁴ All quotes by Rev. Clint Twedt-Ball: Rev. Clint Twedt-Ball correspondence with author, August 28, 2016.