

The House on 6th Street (A)

“You will be killed here.” The words, scrawled in black spray paint across the white wall, greeted Tigani Mohamoud as he entered his modest house in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. Nearby, next to the holes punched through the drywall, were demeaning references to Muslims. When Mohamoud moved to Iowa as a refugee from the war in Sudan eight years earlier, he was seeking a peaceful life and more opportunities. He settled in Iowa City, where he now lives with his wife and daughter and works providing care for the elderly. The house on 6th Street in Cedar Rapids was part of his dream for the future. Situated in a lower-income neighborhood devastated by the historic floods of 2008, the house was damaged but affordable. With an investment of some time and effort, he hoped, this would become his family’s new home. Often, when Mohamoud came to work on the house, he would find something stolen or vandalized, but he was a patient man. Yet this was different: the words scrawled across his walls were a threat.

Mohamoud contacted Miriam Amer of Iowa’s chapter of the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR), a Muslim advocacy and civil rights organization. Amer remembers their conversation. “He said: ‘I’m just weary of this. I’m scared, I’m tired, and I don’t know where to turn.’”¹ As executive director of CAIR-Iowa, Amer investigates civil rights issues across the state, but notes that these are rare in Cedar Rapids. The city, where she lives with her family, is home to the “Mother Mosque of America,” opened in 1934; it is one of the oldest Muslim communities in America. Amer, who lived most of her life in the Northeast, finds Iowa to be kind and welcoming and responsive in times of crisis: she warmly recalls the support of her neighbors after 9/11; following the devastating floods of 2008, she joined the community relief efforts. After Mohamoud’s call, she went to the house to document the “chilling” graffiti and vandalism. Amer took photographs, and posted about the incident on the CAIR-Iowa Facebook page. Before she could even send a press release, her phone started ringing. She notes, “I didn’t expect the news media to pick it up, but they did... And that’s where it took off.”

News of the graffiti left Rev. Clint Twedt-Ball angry and dismayed. The United Methodist pastor knew the neighborhood around 6th Street well: his non-profit organization, Matthew 25, helped to rehabilitate some 250 homes on the west side of Cedar Rapids after the 2008 floods, many in the area near Mohamoud’s home. Through Matthew 25’s Block by Block program, a nationally recognized effort for disaster recovery and neighborhood revitalization, neighbors help each other one block at a time. Twedt-Ball was shocked by the act of hate: “Generally, the neighborhood is proud of the fact that the oldest working mosque in North America is here and is proud of the diverse history of the area.”² He continues, “We have people on our staff that remember the ‘olden days’ of growing up in the 50s and 60s. They talk about how great it was to have several grocery stores and other businesses in the neighborhood run by people of all different backgrounds. It was normal for Muslims and Christians to be together in school and playing through the neighborhood.” His organization, grounded in Christian values, also regularly crosses faith lines: a range of civic and religious groups participate in revitalization projects, including the Islamic Center’s youth group. Twedt-Ball observes, “People were shocked when this happened.”

When Michelle Stafford read the news story and saw the image of the graffiti, she was heartbroken. She was no stranger to discrimination, with one side of her family Native American. Stafford explains, “It’s the same fear-based hatred.”³ Today, her religious identity doesn’t fit neatly into one box: she is the director of a center for alternative healing, trained as a Reiki Master, and identifies as a “Sacred Activist.” At the time of the graffiti, she felt: “It isn’t right that he has to suffer this way, and it’s not right that there are people in the community that think this is alright to do. No, we have to say this isn’t okay. Somebody has to say this isn’t okay. And I guess that’s me.” Stafford shared the news article about the vandalism on her Facebook page and posted: “Let’s do something.” Stafford grew up in Cedar Rapids, a community based “in a farming

philosophy”: here, she explains, people work hard and care about their neighbors. Immediately, Stafford began receiving responses to her post, with responses like: “Whatever you want to do, let me know.”

Encouraged by the response, but unsure of her next steps, Stafford thought: “There are lots of people that want to do the right thing; the issue is that they don’t know what to do. Nobody knows where to begin ... there is no blueprint.”

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 Rev. Clint Twedt-Ball: Rev. Clint Twedt-Ball correspondence with author, August 28, 2016.

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