

Skidmore Park Community Garden



Photo by Bob Wicklund



May 1, community gardeners gather to prepare beds for planting; May 14, planting has begun
Skidmore Park is located at 1085 East 4th Street between Earl and Hancock streets

Brief encounters at the library

by Susan Johnson

As a person who can be deeply moved by everyday experiences, something happened to me that had a profound impact on my perceptions of the citizens of the Dayton's Bluff neighborhood.

I have been going to school at Metropolitan State University for two years and have rarely allowed myself to walk outside the safety of the campus bubble and take in the surrounding neighborhood. The homes and apartments spider out from the shining windows and protected walkways of our beautiful University. Some of the homes are lovely and well maintained, with bikes and toys cluttering porches and yards. Others sit vacant or abandoned, ragged from disuse or misuse.

I don't often walk through the neighborhood as there has never been a reason. This is where I go to school, not where I live, and these are not my people. But then I started meeting some of the people who live here and I realized that this community has a wealth of knowledge and experience that should be taken in and respected as part of my education.

You can find me in the library at least one day a week and many weeks more. Come spring and summer I will be up the hill in the community garden tending vegetables. There is good energy and I work well in the library. I like the feel of the tables and the view from the windows. I also like the diversity of the people, and the lovely melody of the different languages I hear in hushed conversations. People from all over the world are here with me in this tiny pocket of St. Paul to

get an education. I want to know their stories too, but that would be rude, so I smile. I look up and greet people as we pass one another. I do so because I just never know when someone might say "hello."

Many of the people I study with at the library aren't students either, they are community members. Some are poor, some are homeless, and some struggle with mental illness. Many live with the threat of all these factors. For many, this library is their sanctuary.

One afternoon after I had settled myself at a first floor table to study, I left my books to find another resource and when I came back I found I was sharing the space with two gentlemen. They sat facing one another with books open but their focus was not on the books; they were there for each other. I wanted to afford them privacy but did not want them to think that their presence offended or annoyed me, so I sat back down and continued with my reading.

They spoke to each other quietly but they did not whisper. It quickly became evident that the man beside me was in crisis and the man across from him was acting as his mentor and confidant. In the words exchanged were remorse, confusion, grief, anger, and hopelessness. After a few minutes of confession and counsel the young man beside me began to weep. Without looking up I saw his tears splat onto the pages of the book before him; he wiped his face on his sleeve to catch the flow. His counselor did not rush to comfort or hush the young man's release; he sat silently, patiently as if he knew this was part of the process of healing or the catharsis for growth. I don't know what he thought

but his silence was not uncomfortable; it was accepting.

I couldn't help wondering how it happened that out of all these tables, these men decided to sit down here. I wasn't prepared for a story and I didn't even know for sure if they realized I was there. Either they perceived themselves invisible or I was invisible to them. I had no idea what to do, so I pulled out a clean tissue and pressed it into his clenched fist.

Until that moment I had no idea what he looked like other than that he was a young black man but when he looked at me I was surprised. He was much younger than his story conveyed. He was good looking, clean shaven. He wore a heavy sweatshirt but no heavy coat. I was expecting the eyes of a man who had seen years of trouble but what I saw was a frightened boy. I told him I was sorry he was having such a rough time. He just shook his head and said he was all right and thank you.

The man across from me did not fit my expectation either. He was a disheveled white man in his late fifties, heavy with no front teeth. He wore an ill-fitting jacket over a stained T-shirt. As soon as I smiled at him the triangle was complete and for the first time since I sat down, we were all visible to one another. The older man started talking to me as soon as he realized I was open to listen. He told me of his own sadness and misery. His words tumbled over one another as they told bits and pieces of stories I could not fit together. I just listened. The young man beside me sat quietly, tired from his own disclosure.

I listened as long as I could, but I said I had to leave to take a test. The

older gentleman responded by wishing me luck and that he hoped I passed the test. I told him that I was hoping for an "A." He shrugged and repeated his wish for a passing grade. I think his reservations of hopefulness spoke of his own acceptance that sometimes the most we can hope for is surviving the experience.

So, why did this have such a profound effect on me and change the way I look at my role and that of my University within this neighborhood?

This experience gave me a glimpse of the interconnected relationships and the interdependence of the people living here. I don't know their whole stories but I want for them the chance to hope, dream and aspire to live as full a life as I am.

It stopped me in my tracks when I realized this young man was already preparing himself to just get by. His only counsel was from a man who needed a helping hand himself. It made me want to be part of a solution or at least part of the hope and the hand that helps. Isn't there some way we here at Metropolitan State University can be that hand?

I bring an extra lunch every day, because sometimes a smile isn't enough.

Susan Johnson is a graduating senior at Metro State.

Council president to run for Senate seat

Dayton's Bluff District Council president Avinash Viswanathan resigned from the council's board of directors at its May 17 meeting.

Viswanathan announced his intention to run for the Minnesota Senate seat opened up by Senator Mee Moua's resignation at the end of the 2010 legislative session. Viswanathan is on the staff of U.S. Senator Al Franken.

The district council bylaws prohibit a member of the board of directors from concurrently running for public office.

His resignation leaves a vacancy on the board of directors in Dayton's Bluff subdistrict D which includes the Mounds Park area and the portion of the district east of Johnson Parkway (see map at www.daytonsbuff.org). A resident of subdistrict D who is interested in filling the vacancy should contact the council at 651-772-2075.



Nate Johnson and Eric Wickstrom with a Conservation Corps team at Swede Hollow May 8

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Monthly Circulation: 7,500

Also available online at www.daytonsbuff.org. This is a publication of Hopewell Communications, Inc. and is intended to provide a forum for the ideas and opinions of its readers and to be an instrument for developing community awareness and pride. No material contained in this paper may be reprinted without consent of the editor. Articles and letters to the editor are welcome and may be emailed to CarlaRiehle@fastmail.us or faxed to 651-774-3510. The *Dayton's Bluff District Forum* is delivered to every home and business in the Dayton's Bluff Area. Outside this area, subscriptions cost \$12.00 and may be arranged by calling 651-772-2075.

Board of Directors: Greg Cosimini, Karin DuPaul and Steve Trimble
 Editor and Layout: Carla Riehle

Next issue: July 2010. Deadline for material: June 5, 2010