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Leading Ladies

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Our mission: Authentic community-based journalism that amplifies and inspires the stories, action steps, and leadership of powerful, everyday women (cis and trans) and nonbinary people.

Our vision: We all are parts of a greater whole. Our stronger future will be built from the collective energy of people who shift narratives to effect change.

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Digital Development: Mikki Morrissette

This month's writers: Fatoun Ali, Katie Dohman, Sarah Gruidl, Carolina Ortiz, Erica Rivera, Alexis Yeboah

Cover: Nadia Mohamed. See her story on page 12. Photo by Sarah Whiting

Minnesota Women's Press earned six 2023 awards from the Minnesota Newspaper Association, including community service leadership.

Upcoming magazine topics include Hometown Challenges (March), Our 40 Years (April)

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PHOTO SARAH WHITING

CAROLINA ORTIZ, PAGE 6

"There are always more opportunities to get it right, to fashion our lives in the ways we deserve to have them."

— Clarissa Pinkola Estes,
Women Who Run With the Wolves

What True Leadership Looks Like

by Mikki Morrissette

In a way, having a "Leading Ladies" theme this month is superfluous, since the feminists we feature *every* month are leading the way toward stronger and healthier communities. But, in our current political moment, it is especially useful to showcase a few of the powerful women, nonbinary, and trans leaders who are protecting rights and standing up against a backlash of misogynistic, anti-trans, and anti-immigrant rhetoric.

For these voices, the path forward is a relatively simple one:

Lead with pro-humanity values — balancing both fire and compassion — and work in collaboration.

This month we feature advocates from Outfront, Gender Justice, Pro-Choice, and The Advocates for Human Rights.

We hear from Carolina Ortiz, who leads environmental justice work with Comunidades Organizando el Poder y la Acción Latina (COPAL), a 45,000-member strong movement to support the Latine community in Minnesota.

We talk with Nadia Mohamed, the mayor of Saint Louis Park, about how she is connecting people in her community.

We meet some of the remarkable people who meet weekly to connect as a support group — from formerly incarcerated women to judges — as well as the director of restorative justice work based in Brainerd.

We also continue our work focused on gender-based violence, with stories about the work to help eradicate the sex trafficking of Minnesota youth.

I recently moderated a discussion with three of the 20-something leaders we featured in the January Hope & Grief magazine. One of them, Melissa Vasquez, said: "I've witnessed the pain of uncertainty, and the resilience this experience demands. But through my work at LatinoLead, I've also witnessed a powerful shift. [We] are no longer asking for permission to exist or to belong. We are building spaces where we can thrive on our own terms."

That is the vision of the people we feature this month.

As always, we could not do this work without the readers who support us with donations and memberships. This month, we also highlight the names of 2024 supporters who helped us keep our doors open. We will continue to ask for your financial support to increase the numbers of people who read these stories statewide.

PHOTO SARAH WHITING

Dancers lead the 2025 People's March in Saint Paul. See more photos at womenspress.com.

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How to Build a Life of Financial and Emotional Health

submitted by Fatoun Ali

PHOTO SARAH WHITING

I began my life in Somalia, where civil war broke out when I was 13. I lived in a refugee camp and survived the trauma of extreme poverty and abuse. I dreamed of a better life. I came to the U.S. in 1998 alone and pregnant — my husband at the time would join me in San Diego two months later.

I didn't know anything about goal setting, time management, or financial planning until I came to Minnesota and registered at Community Action Partnership for a two-year program called "Self-Sufficiency for Low-Income Families."

By then, I had two children and had left an abusive home, gone through divorce, and moved across the country. In the program, I learned how to manage my time, set goals, and organize my home to steadily achieve those goals. I discovered how to maintain good credit. I learned how to write checks and balance my checkbook. I learned how to save.

My family caseworker encouraged me to get the education I needed to get a better job with a stronger income. I attended Minneapolis College and got an associate's degree in business management in two years. I met my mentor Mickey Mikeworth, who taught me to organize my time by dividing my day into one-hour or half-hour increments.

Emotional Health

I cried for the first ten years I was in Minneapolis. I was deeply wounded from living in a war-torn country, moving across the world, fleeing violence, and losing family. I found a helpful therapist to talk to. My suggestions:

- If you're feeling numb, rageful, or so low you can't seem to pull yourself up, tell yourself the truth. You are not okay right now, but you can be with help.
- Get over the cultural stigma of seeking help.

Emotions can seem overwhelming and scary, but they are temporary. The only way to heal is to feel. Having mental health support is crucial.

Financial Health

My former husband used my name and information to apply for credit cards online without my knowledge. One day I discovered that I owed money — that I was liable to pay — for purchases I didn't know anything about. I also had a close friend who unintentionally messed up my credit. She needed my help to rent an apartment, so I signed her apartment lease. When she was not able to pay rent and I was taken to court. After that, I had trouble renting a home for my family. Suggestions:

- Don't cosign loans for other people unless you choose to help their life in a meaningful and lasting way — like college or trade school for your children.
- Get a secure, pre-paid credit card from a reputable bank, use less than 30 percent of the line of credit each month, and pay it on time. Set up autopay from your bank account so you do not miss a payment. MWP

This essay was adapted from Fatoun Ali's book *My Dear Loving Sisters: Tea and Stories From an Audacious Life.* She is founder of the Somali Youth & Family Development Center. fatounali.com

Latine Minnesotans Organize Around Collective Health

PHOTO SARAH WHITING

submitted by Carolina Ortiz

I have πbeen a member of COPAL (Comunidades Organizando el Poder y la Acción Latina) since its founding in 2018. I am from Zacatecas, Mexico, and came to Minnesota for an education in communications and women's studies. At COPAL, I lead the team focused on environmental advocacy and legislative policy.

When COPAL started, there were two employees. Now we have more than 35, with offices in Minneapolis, Rochester, and Mankato. Our nonprofit work is focused on health and wellness, environmental justice, workers' rights, civic engagement, and organizing. We have a lot of Minnesotans engaged with COPAL now — more than 45,000 people, who have come to us through door knocking, phone banking, one-on-one conversations, tabling, or walk-ins at our Worker Center.

I am also part of the Health Care for All Minnesota coalition. We discussed a false sense of security that HIPAA protects us when we provide information to health care organizations. Many people don't know that medical deportations have been happening around the country — when an uninsured immigrant patient can be removed from the U.S. without the consent of the patient or their family. U.S. Immigrant and Customs Enforcement are not supposed to enter churches, hospitals, and schools.

We have started to talk about how we prepare when that happens in Minnesota. I would like to see more people aware of the possibility, where it is happening, and what people can do.

We also would like to see more awareness of the reasons for migration. Many members do not see their movements as due to climate-induced natural disasters. They consider themselves to be "seeking better opportunities," such as moving from California to Minnesota — not considering the fact that increasing issues with wildfires and water have climate-related roots.

Legislative Action

COPAL has been part of several new legislative policies:

- The Driver's License for All policy passed in 2023. We organized a 45-day campaign to mobilize COPAL members in partnership with other community leaders, faith congregations, and elected lawmakers to make it easier for immigrants to get a driver's license. This was an historic achievement in transforming a long-entrenched system.
- We championed the Democracy for People Act to improve language services, make voter registration

more accessible, and create more transparency around campaign finance systems.
- We were part of supporting the Paid Family and Medical Leave law, which enables workers to take time off for health and family reasons without retaliation from employers, which will start in 2026.

We also have led policy work around environmental justice that will lead to the identification of neighborhoods where residents are most vulnerable to pollution, in order to enact additional protections for those communities. The Minnesota Pollution Control Agency will analyze pollution rates starting in 2026.

High-energy bills impact our economic security, toxic chemicals are applied to farms, lands are mined, water is polluted, and refineries contaminate neighborhoods. All lives are affected.

Toxic industries also tend to rely on low-income community members and communities of color for labor, which leads to health crises.

COPAL is advocating for green economy jobs and worker health protections to reduce harmful practices. We intend to spotlight narratives that indicate why this is necessary.

Climate Narratives

On our website we link to the 2020 senior thesis of Alejandra Gallardo, of the College of Saint Benedict and Saint John's University Environmental Studies Department. She interviewed environmental migrants from El Salvador and Honduras, pointing out that between 2008 and 2013, an average of 27 million people were displaced each year by natural disasters. She also notes that slower and gradual changes in climate — land degradation, chronic droughts, and repeated crop failures — impact agricultural careers and production.

Central America is a hotspot for climate change. Gallardo explains that the tropical dry forest ecosystems along the Pacific side of Central America produce cyclical droughts and hurricane seasons. This is why Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, and Nicaragua are highly susceptible to climate change, characterized by irregular rainfall and an extended four-to-six-month dry season. The area has some of the highest proportions of degraded land and deforestation per year in Latin America.

If more people understood the reasons for immigration from environmental issues like this, they might understand why a more compassionate approach to newcomers is needed.

The narrative that Central American migrants are lazy, or violent criminals, ignores why these human beings are moving to seek safety and support.

Gallardo interviewed the founder of Nuevo Gualcho, who established a committee of 25 influential women from neighboring communities. She writes that the group used "collaborative models to exchange knowledge and advocate for household concerns in spaces where women are traditionally left out."

Rapid Growth

It isn't easy to connect and organize 45,000 Minnesotans. Our offices in Mankato and Rochester are extensions of the work happening in the Twin Cities, where people can request resources or support. People can take the driver's license test in those spaces.

As a new organization with rapid growth, we have learned from mistakes and failures. Talented, smart, skilled people have helped guide us through the process.

We have a committee for each focus area. In one committee, teachers in the group expressed concern about what 2025 might bring for students who have undocumented family members and are not in the right mindset to focus on school. We're talking with a local theater to create safe spaces so that teachers can create a curriculum for classrooms.

The key to any healthy organization is to listen and prioritize the needs of its members. MWP

Gender and Climate

Georgetown University's report on "The Climate Gender Conflict Nexus" explores the linkages between climate change and conflict and the intertwined nature of gender. It explores the role women play globally in managing local natural resources, and the barriers to meaningful participation.

It shares the stories of climate change and conflict unfolding in Colombia, Sudan, and Nepal, and how women are contributing to enhanced peace and sustainability in their communities despite gendered obstacles. In Nepal, for example, women from marginalized castes are engaged in forest management.

The report leads to five priority areas of action and recommendations for gender equity and climate resilience. The report concludes: "Addressing barriers to women's meaningful participation and local leadership will further accelerate gains across gender equality, peace and security, sustainability, and climate resilience."

PHOTO SARAH WHITING

Leading Lights

Advocates gear up to protect vulnerable Minnesotans

reported by Katie Dohman

The recent presidential election left many feeling uncertain and fearful. But local advocates say that while it wasn't the election result they hoped for, it's one they have prepared for. "There's not some grand gesture that solves all these problems, and frankly, winning the election was not going to be that either," says Megan Peterson, executive director of Gender Justice.

The upshot? The strategies and connections advocates have made are working, which so far means they don't have to reorganize in major ways to respond.

It's not going to be easy. They all acknowledge harm will happen. But they're ready. And, they say, the keys to fighting back against inevitable Trump administration rollbacks will be consistency, community, and communication — along with financial, in-person, and other creative help. Here are some of the 2025 plans.

Outfront MN

Kat Rohn, Executive Director (pictured left)

Immediately after the election, Kat Rohn says, Outfront focused on providing community care, "reminding people we can sustain even when it's really hard, and [recognizing] our community's strengths and ability to get creative."

Rohn says the organization is prepared to see rollbacks on immigration, mass deportation, and increased challenges for those seeking asylum in the U.S., particularly among LGBTQ+ neighbors. Challenges to Title IX, removal of health and census data, bans on trans folks in the military, and rollbacks on gender-affirming care are expected.

While life will get more complicated, Rohn says there will be ways in which more policy enactment and litigation can slow things down, "as long as folks are aware and not precomplying. We can delay the worst impacts, especially in Minnesota, and buy time to organize people to make change — whether [that effort] goes toward midterm elections or to build structures to sustain and protect ourselves."

"Our next step — and one Minnesotans can engage in — is to create insulation and protection."

This includes conversations with top levels of Minnesota leadership, the attorney general's office, legislators, and more.

Rohn adds, "Minnesota is so much better insulated against many of these attacks than our peer states. That gives us reason to be hopeful, and time to organize and engage folks. We do expect changes. It's going to cause harm, but we have space and resources to organize against it."

The Advocates for Human Rights

Hanne Sandison, Program Director, Refugee and Immigrant Program, and Lindsay Greising, Policy Counsel

As the wheels of justice turn slowly, both Hanne Sandison and Lindsay Greising see that much of their work remains the same: educating people on the realities of complex immigration law, and using the courts in particular to seek safety for immigrant and refugee communities.

"People are rightly fearful, based on promises made and unspoken promises and threats," says Greising.

"The dark-gray lining to this is that we've done this before. We were active in protecting our clients and mobilizing volunteers to help those seeking asylum, or who were trafficked, in the prior Trump administration," Sandison says.

After the election, Greising says, a coalition call helped her realize other advocates also had learned a lot in the intervening years. "While it's a scary time, and there's a trifecta — and perhaps a less friendly judiciary — there are really smart, strong advocates and strategies that have been developed that will meet the moment."

COURTESY PHOTOS

(top) Hanne Sandison, (bottom) Lindsay Greising

One push has been to coordinate mass-mobilization strategies with other organizations in order to respond to negative political messaging and harm to asylum-seeking communities.

"The narrative is so toxic around immigration," adds Sandison. "These are real humans at the center. When talking to people who hold strongly anti-immigrant positions and narratives, they are surprised by the people they know impacted by these policies. When you actually know anybody impacted, it starts to break down quickly. I maintain hope that people's minds can be changed."

To avoid overwhelm, Greising thinks of her work in buckets: dispelling misinformation, providing legal representation, offering community education, and managing legislation.

continued on next page

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Gender Justice

Megan Peterson, Executive Director

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"On the one hand, we have been here before, so we have some idea [of what might happen]," Megan Peterson says. "But at the same time, the number-one theme of a Trump administration is that he is an agent of chaos. The best thing to plan for is ongoing uncertainty and surprises."

Gender Justice is prepared to ask questions to guide advocates: "How do we use tools at the state level? How do we use the courts to slow down what harms may come from the federal level?"

Peterson says the organization plans to expand its work into North Dakota. "We're going to lean into using our institutions to blunt the potential impact of Trump administration plans and action," she says.

The last two years in Minnesota included a push to get bills across the finish line and signed into law. "This is a new environment, and a much harder road," Peterson acknowledges. "We have to adjust our approach. I don't think it means nothing positive can happen through the legislature. But I think part of our job as advocates will be to continue to go at it as though we can get it passed. Even if we can't, it helps to be ready when we have the votes to do it."

Pro-Choice Minnesota

Hayley Bloom Peterson, 501(c)3 Treasurer and incoming (c)3 Board Chair for 2025; Alyssa Greene, 501(c)4 Board Chair

Pro-Choice Minnesota advocates Hayley Bloom Peterson

PHOTO SARAH WHITING

Alyssa Greene (l) and Hayley Bloom Peterson

and Alyssa Greene say that while the election was not the result they were hoping for, the real gut punch was when the divided Supreme Court changed Roe v. Wade.

Bloom Peterson says the fall of Roe "changed the calculus in a lot of spaces," precipitating changes throughout the country. "Reproductive rights have been under attack forever, and even when we have protections like Roe or the PRO Act in Minnesota, people are still trying to dismantle them. It's not like this work changes that much, just because a new person is elected," she says.

Greene says one of their focuses will be to support volunteers, particularly campus organizers, who will be future leaders of the work. "They're helping put the right people in power who know what they're talking about, and listen to people who understand medication and health care versus spewing propaganda," she says. "Building that community and connection, and bringing forth the education piece — rooted in science, equity, and community — is critical."

Bloom Peterson says that because of tighter resources among health care professionals, and diminished access, they'll continue to ensure Minnesota will be a state where rights are protected through advocacy, laws, policies, and services. "Pro-Choice Minnesota is not going anywhere," she says. "We're excited about this work. It's important work, and we're on the right side." MWP

PHOTO SARAH WHITING

Nadia Mohamed: An Historic Rise as Mayor

reported by Sarah Gruidl

When Nadia Mohamed thinks about her journey to becoming mayor of Saint Louis Park, she marks a beginning in 2016, when Donald Trump was elected president for the first time. As was the case for many young activists, after seeing the election results she propelled herself into political action and community organizing.

She also traces her journey ten years earlier, when she started making monthly visits to Saint Louis Park City Hall to drop off her family's rent check for subsidized housing. "Somewhere inside me [today] is a 10-year-old girl who wanted her face on the wall of mayors," she says. She noticed that all of the city's mayors were white, and only two of them were women.

Then a new immigrant to the U.S., Mohamed longed for a sense of belonging in her city. She says part of her role as mayor is to inspire young residents who look like her. Shortly after she was elected mayor, Mohamed visited a local elementary school, where she "watched in real time as the students tried to compute how someone who looks like me could be the mayor." One girl wearing a hijab told her that the two of them are probably cousins, Mohamed recalls with a laugh.

After four years serving on the Saint Louis Park City Council, from 2020 to 2024, she is acutely aware of the systemic barriers that reinforce underrepresentation in elected office — starting with the steep cost of running a campaign. Her city council campaign was financially draining. "Most people in my network did not have the disposable income to make even a small contribution," she says.

When she ran for mayor, Mohamed was able to tap into new connections and resources. Today she promotes mixed-income communities where "those in million-dollar homes live next to those in Section 8 housing."

Another financial barrier to holding elected office is the salary. Like many elected officials, Mohamed works a second job, spending her 9-to-5 at a state agency doing child advocacy work. She and parents and siblings rent their home in Saint Louis Park — an experience that sets her apart from former mayors and city council members.

Mohamed's commitment to affordable housing was central in her city council campaign and remains at the top of her priority list as mayor. "There's a stigmatization of renters, with some [indicating that renters' status means] they are not invested in the community," she explains. She is working to provide pathways for renters in her city.

Since her election to city council at age 23, becoming its youngest-ever member, Mohamed has developed much more confidence about her age.

"I used to worry about my age and play it down," she says. Now her 28 years are a point of pride. She says that most Saint Louis Park residents are excited to see someone young in the mayor's office. She's also found power in sharing openly

about not knowing something, pushing back on the expectation that "women in public office must reach for total perfection."

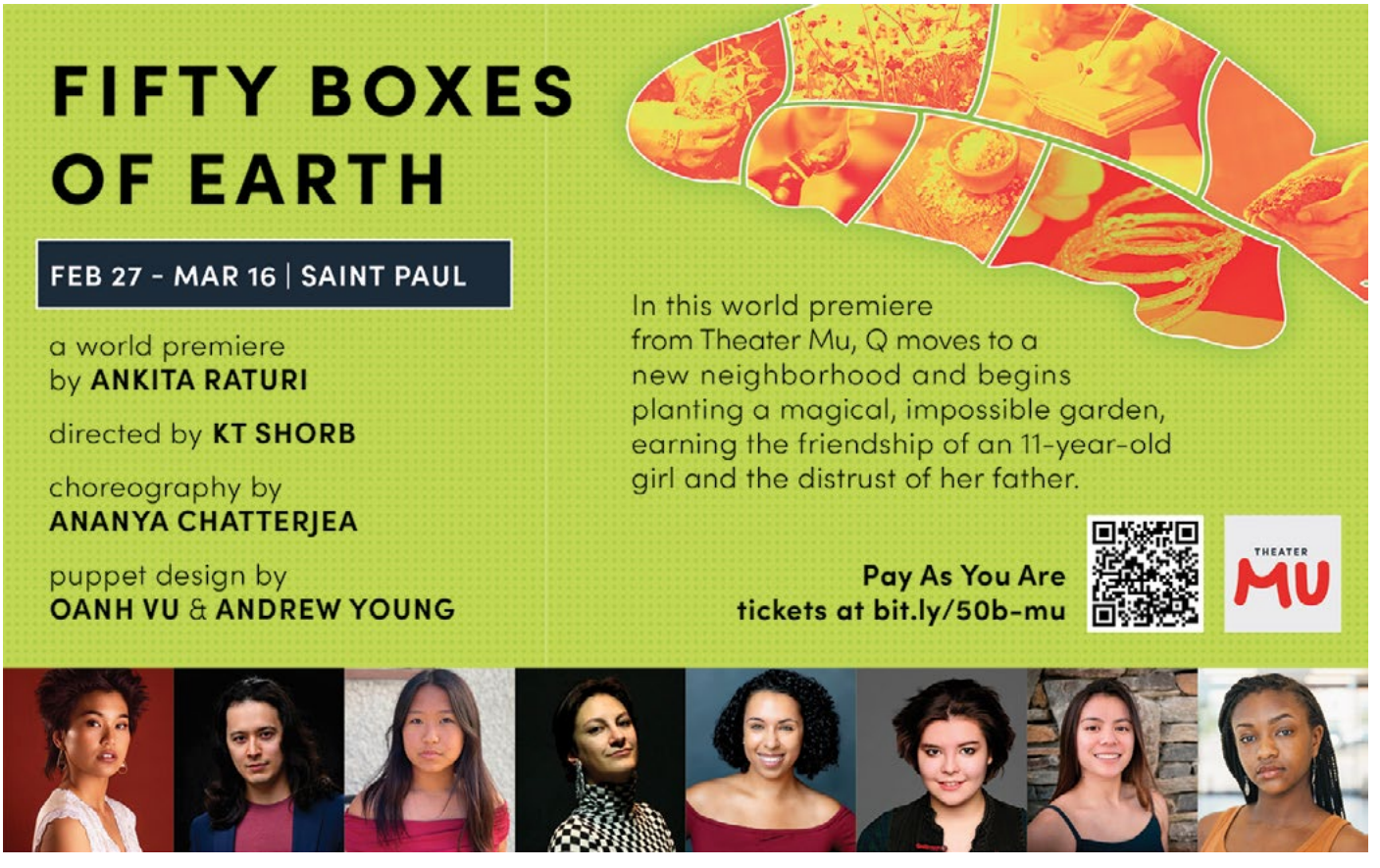
One point of Mohamed's identity that has not wavered is her faith. The national attention in the wake of her election — as the first Somali mayor in the United States and the first Muslim mayor of Saint Louis Park — has died down, but the questions about her relationship to Jewish constituents persist.

For Mohamed, these questions overlook the complexity and diversity of her city. "When people look at Saint Louis Park, they look at white, affluent community members, and they often think of the history of the Jewish people here," she says, indicating that growing Thai and Somali communities are changing the city's demographics.

Mohamed says she builds trust with all residents in a simple, straightforward way: "I just show up with my values, with my hijab, with what I stand for. And I do what I can to provide the things that residents need."

Now in her second year on the job, she remains focused on the basics. "My constituents need their roads safe, their water drinkable, their snow plowed," she says.

The accomplishment she is most proud of so far is powerful but simple: she passed her first budget for 2025. Mohamed says, "I've been reiterating and reaffirming that I am for Saint Louis Park, by Saint Louis Park, of Saint Louis Park." MWP



Healing Together:

A Women's Support Group Transforms Justice in Ramsey County

PHOTO SARAH WHITING

reported by Mikki Morrissette

Brenda Roth (center) serves food to the support group with Mutteat Lawal and Gail Moerke.

A unique support group in Ramsey County is fostering healing and change for women involved in the legal system. Founded three years ago, the group brings together individuals from diverse backgrounds, including women re-entering society, judges, attorneys, and other community members, to share experiences and support one another. The group is exploring ways to manage its rapid growth while maintaining its core mission of mutual support and healing.

Brenda Roth, a participant, credits the group for helping her confront past trauma and find strength. "The support here has been life-changing," she says. The weekly gatherings, held at the Wilder Foundation, focus on conversation, healing, and community-building. She wishes this kind of healing had been possible before her incarceration. "Someone who understood that I needed treatment would have helped."

The women's group started with fewer than a dozen people. Today there are nearly 70 people attending the weekly gatherings for 1.5 hours of conversation and food. "We've had people from different counties in Minnesota [coming] to see and listen who were very impressed," says Roth. "There's so much healing going on. Everyone, no matter where they are in life, share their stories with us and show that they have imperfections. That makes me want to be better because, dang, they've experienced things that I've experienced."

Group members support each other in practical and emotional ways. "Every adversity I've had thrown at me, they've helped me through," Roth says. "Sometimes it's just showing care and concern. Or they can help you get your driver's license back. Some days there are so many women there that we only get to check in, but that is still fulfilling. Because we all want to help the next person. What an ugly place I have been in — I don't want to see others there."

Emma Koski, public defender

Emma Koski joined the group as it started three years ago. At the time, founding judges Sara Grewing and Nicole Starr wanted to make life easier for women who have experienced barriers that led them into the court system. Since then, Koski says, the group has evolved to "being like a safe, supportive space of women who want to see each other succeed and to recognize the struggles that we've all

been through. We recognize that we can relate to each other more than we ever thought we could."

One woman wondered "why would these important people want to sit in a room with me?" After being involved, Koski says, the woman realized that everyone struggles with work, time management, and parenting. "I think she's gained confidence knowing that other people care. It's important that women know there are people in all fields, including judges and prosecutors, who want to see them do well. We don't all want everyone to be locked up, which I think for some of them is a surprise. It's helpful to understand that a judge wants to see you out in the community."

Koski says the experience of this connection has made her a better public defender. She has also benefited personally from the group. She has otherwise tended to be guarded — not realizing people will listen if she needs support. "One of the great things is that we can take off our work hat and just put on our human hat. We're an extended family now — the kids all hug you when you arrive."

Maria Mitchell, Ramsey County judge

As a previous public defender for 15 years, and a volunteer, Maria Mitchell understands some of the issues facing people who appear for trials and sentencing in her courtroom. She is involved with the group because otherwise she is not consistently talking to people about issues on the street and the barriers getting in their way.

"Being in this group keeps me grounded," Mitchell says. "I have learned about the capacity to reinvent self from the women in the group. I started reading about indigenous healing of self from emotional trauma, and that has become my main goal. It feeds my spirit to learn how to be more restorative. If you are invested in the community, then you are not going to want to harm the community."

She says the justice system is not yet capable of doing restorative work. "There is an epidemic of loneliness, and that is when you often make bad choices," Mitchell says. "You want to be around people who are encouraging and make you know that you matter. Even though not everything [that comes out of group] is good, it is refreshing to see positive things when you see so much negative all week. I want to make change, and being in court doesn't necessarily fulfill that for me."

Mitchell says the key for many participants in the group is to learn how to be vulnerable and "talk about hard stuff and process it so it doesn't come out sideways. Healing, in my mind, is the root of everything. We all have generational trauma, including family members suffering from alcoholism and physical abuse. I have seen in court more than five people who saw their mother murdered in front of them — that has lasting impact on them."

Lyndsey Olson, city attorney

As the Saint Paul city attorney, Lyndsey Olson is the chief prosecutor who discusses high-level cases with her team and builds programs that include "how we think about our role of prosecution, how we think about justice and our mission."

One program, Ethos, is a restorative justice program that connects people who have committed crimes and people who have experienced trauma. "I think it's our duty as prosecutors to help people come full circle after they commit crimes, and particularly with misdemeanors — we're not talking about folks who are committing violent felonies. A lot of times our folks don't need jail. They need trauma healing, reintegration, community support, and wraparound services in order to be successful."

Olson shares information and resources in the group, such as how to find an attorney in another state to respond to a warrant. "Just being able to say, 'Here's what you do, and I can provide a resource to contact,' is helpful. It might otherwise cost $450 to find an answer to a simple question."

She acknowledges that the group is about much more than sharing information."We acknowledge that we

continued on next page

PHOTO SARAH WHITING

(l–r) Emma Koski, Gail Moerke, Veronica Walthers, Diana Vang, Brenda Roth, Nikki Starr, Lyndsey Olson, Fulisha Fulmer, Monica Long, Muteeat Lawal, Sara Grewing

have very different experiences because of age, race, our socioeconomic status, our job, our justice-involved past — but we all have things that bond us as human beings and as women. That is genuinely shared in a very raw way."

The group has grown quickly because people bring others who are working on staying sober, getting into housing, finding a job, wanting to get an education.

"There are amazing stories of transformations. I feel fed by the group. I take joy in their success. Many of them are extremely brave and strong and amazing individuals that have done a lot of work. It's inspiring."

The group uses the Seeking Safety curriculum to help shape conversations. It can be stressful for participants to open up about heavy topics such as addictions and trauma in a group setting. When she is tapped as facilitator, Olson sometimes uses light-hearted prompts, such as a session when she asked everyone to share a song that uplifts or gives them a sense of connection.

"I talked about how music affects your brain, how it feeds you, why that is, and how it connects your emotions," Olson says. "We played bits of the songs people mentioned. It can be a happy minute to bond with people and not talk about the most traumatic thing that happened to you. People need that too."

Lessons to Share

One of the growing pains the group is figuring out is how to accommodate a growing number of people and help them feel safe. "So many of the women that have been incarcerated are there because of unhealed trauma," Mitchell says. "It would be nice to heal trauma before they are involved in the justice system. Healing from this group is primarily about simply being in community with others, but we're not therapists."

The group has offered tapping and breathing exercises for healing, cosmetic cleansing as self-care, and housing assistance. Two guest speakers included someone from a domestic abuse shelter and a female police chief who talked about individual safety plans and taught self-defense. A judge brought in her sister, who taught CPR. After a woman witnessed an overdose on the train, Ramsey County chemical health people came in to talk about and give out Narcan. Others have talked about what good therapy looks like and how to advocate for the care you need. Members of the group have been directed to WomenVenture and Propel for Nonprofits to try to create a paid peer-to-peer network.

What helps the strength of the group, Mitchell says, is having consistent justice-involved people and volunteers. Ten people are on a planning email to help facilitate the conversations. One to two people moderate each evening's conversation on a rotating basis. A prosecutor orders food, which is served to make sure there is enough for everyone. Someone in the public defender's office does the bookkeeping. Mitchell keeps a suitcase of age-appropriate activities in her car for child care, which could range from 1–16 kids. Roth organizes a summer picnic.

The director of Ramsey County Community Corrections, Monica Long, strongly believes in the group to give people options to break cycles that prevent them from leading safe and supported lives. Says Mitchell, "We started off with money from a racial equity fund in the county manager's office. After that ran out, Monica made room in her budget so we can give participants a hot meal and gift cards."

The group requires that people check in and stay the whole time. Says Olson, "We want everyone to respect the people that want to get something out of it. We want people to be part of the conversation and meet others."

Participants do not all live in Ramsey County, since many women have to find less expensive living options elsewhere. One woman drives two hours each way to be in the group.

Olson adds that it is important that everyone participates on a level playing field. "We're not there for the same reasons, but we're all talking about our day. It helps create the bond and trust. I'm the city attorney, but I am not there on a different level, the way it feels in court. We are together in a circle — all just women and human beings talking." MWP

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Helping Loved Ones, and Yourself, With Mental Illness and Trauma

WHEN YOU WANT TO	CONSIDER THESE MESSAGES
Instill hope	**I believe in you.** **You've gotten through hard times in the past.**
Express empathy	**You can do this.** **That must be really tough.** **I know you're hurting.** **I'm sorry you're going through such a difficult time.**

Excerpt from *Loving Someone With a Mental Illness or History of Trauma* by Michelle D. and DeAnne M. Sherman. Copyright 2025. Published with permission of Johns Hopkins University Press.

The mother-and-daughter team of DeAnne and Michelle Sherman have co-authored several books for teenagers and adults who are impacted by family members with mental health issues. Daughter Michelle was first motivated to create resources for families when she realized that loved ones in waiting rooms of mental health clinics at the Veterans Administration hospital — where she treated people with post-traumatic stress disorder and other mental illnesses — tended not to have resources for their own grief, fear, and uncertainty.

Says Michelle: "As we think about PTSD and mental illness in general, one of the most important parts of recovery is connection and relationship. I'm not minimizing the importance of medications, evidence-based psychotherapies, group support — but a huge part of recovery is having a safe place, a place of being seen."

One in four people has mental illness at any given time, and even more people experience depression, anxiety, or other mental health issues at some point. Without enough culturally appropriate therapists, or access to treatment, to support that need, the Shermans hope the books fills some of that gap.

"Part of why we created a support-group-in-a-book was to help people feel they aren't alone," says Michelle. "If you live in a rural area with few resources, or there are schedules or stigma, a support group might not be an option."

As an educator, DeAnne is grateful for teachers who have helped destigmatize and inform young people about mental illness. "When we wrote the second edition of our book for teens, we had 15 or 20 teens read different chapters and give us feedback. It's amazing how articulate they were, and how informed they were about mental illness — a lot different from the youth who read our first edition. I think teens today are more comfortable talking about their own mental health problems, or their parent's mental illness. That is really good news."

She emphasizes the need for self-care. "That can mean going into your office, closing the door, turning the lights off, and just breathing for five minutes. Or going for a quick walk, to center yourself outside or in nature. None of this stuff is easy. We do not say, 'If you take care of yourself, things are going to be okay.' But it makes a difference. Maybe it's a pedicure, or going to a sports bar, or the theater. Even just small acts of self-care are essential." MWP

Find this full story at womenspress.com/collective-health. It was featured in our new Creativity & Connection newsletter, womenspress.com/subscribe

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Restorative Justice in Brainerd

reported by Alexis Yeboah

Across Minnesota, communities are using a restorative justice framework to address harm and to foster healing. According to the 2024 Restorative Justice Services Directory, published by the Minnesota Department of Corrections, there are 57 restorative justice organizations listed across the state.

Jeanine Wiley of the Lake Area Restorative Justice Project (LARJP), based in Brainerd, says her organization has spent two decades focused on diverting youth from the criminal justice system. The restorative justice model teaches accountability by focusing on impacts of the harm to individuals and community. They allow the youth to take responsibility for their offenses and make amends. The model reflects a desire to move away from traditional punitive measures of crime reduction and toward methods that allow for deeper healing of individuals and communities.

Traditional justice systems often fail to address the root causes of harm. In contrast, the restorative model creates space for the prevention of reoffending.

Michele Braley has been engaged in this work with Seward Longfellow Restorative Justice (SLRJ) in Minneapolis for sixteen of the organization's thirty years of existence. "We know so much more about

brain development now, and that should inform how we address youth behavior," she says.

Organizations like LARJP and SLRJ work with both traditional law enforcement entities and non-traditional partners to identify youth who could benefit from restorative programs.

In 2024, LARJP managed more than 130 cases, a significant increase from the normal 30 to 50 cases in years prior, highlighting the growing interest in restorative practices. The vast majority of referrals came from county attorneys, police departments, and schools. Referrals also came from sources such as loss-prevention departments in retail stores. "We've really seen a shift in how the community responds to our programming and its ability to divert harm," says Wiley.

PHOTO SARAH WHITING

Jeanine Wiley

A cornerstone of LARJP's restorative work is the prevention of reoffending. They do this by helping the youth accept responsibility, often by learning directly about the impact of their choices upon the harmed party, typically within ten days of the offense.

"The youth and the impacted parties work through a restorative agreement which provides the youth with the opportunity to amend their wrongs through activities such as apology letters, creative projects, and restorative hours, adding skills and contact with positive nontraditional adults, increasing self-worth, and preventing future offenses."

Recidivism rates are a key metric for evaluating the program's success.

Case by Case

Restorative justice is not a one-size-fits-all solution. LARJP has established clear boundaries regarding the cases it accepts. "People think everything can go through a restorative justice framework, but it's not for everything," explains Wiley.

Eligible cases typically involve minor, non-violent offenses such as theft, property damage, and underage drinking. Other criteria include willingness of the youth's family and the harmed party to participate. Family members may hesitate to engage in a full restorative process, which can span weeks or months. Some harmed parties prefer traditional punitive action to restorative measures.

Wiley says LARJP plans to recruit businesses and social services for partnerships to further help with diversion efforts.

The work LARJP does with youth doesn't stop after the formal restorative process concludes. Case managers learn about youth interests and work to pair them with local businesses and community members to develop new skills for their future. For example, one youth was interested in small engine repair. "LARJP was able to pair this individual with a local mechanic shop owner. Together they repaired two snow blowers, which were donated to the local women's domestic violence shelter and to Teen Challenge," says Wiley.

LARJP also partners with local YMCAs to provide memberships to youth enrolled in their programs. It hopes to broaden its scope by developing programs to address a wider range of conflicts and environments — such as in workplaces. With an expanded suite of services, and additional revenue streams, the intention is to hire more facilitators, introduce new training opportunities, and expand its geographical reach.

LARJP is addressing misconceptions and biases, and conducts trainings about the value of restorative justice with Crow Wing County police as well as community leaders in counties across Minnesota — including Olmsted, Morrison, and Wright so far.

Restorative justice is not yet the norm. Systems change is a slow and arduous process. Wiley remains optimistic about its growth, believing that the practice can drive meaningful transformation. Restorative justice "can help transform not just cases, but the entire fabric of our community," she says. MWP

PHOTO SARAH WHITING

Breaking Chains

The Collective Effort to Combat Human Trafficking

reported by Erica Rivera

"We need more partners in this fight," says Tammy Lee, the CEO of OUR Rescue, a nonprofit dedicated to eradicating sex trafficking and child exploitation. According to the International Labor Organization (ILO), forced commercial sexual exploitation generates $173 billion in illegal global profits annually. Although many think of human trafficking as a back-alley crime that occurs in other countries or big cities, Minnesota has become an epicenter of human trafficking cases.

OUR Rescue aims to fight that reality through education, operations, and survival care. Lee joined OUR Rescue in 2024 following decades of leadership experience in Minnesota-based industries such as Delta Airlines, the University of Minnesota Foundation, and Carlson Companies. While at Carlson, she spearheaded initiatives supporting nonprofits working to eradicate human trafficking. She also served on the White House Interagency Task Force to Combat Trafficking in Persons.

Lee, of Hopkins, spoke to Women's Press about the state of human trafficking, OUR Rescue's move to Minneapolis, and how the organization is joining forces with local partners to make change.

What is the current state of human trafficking?

Human trafficking is quickly catching up to the illegal drug trade. You can sell a bag of drugs one time. You can sell a human six to 10 times a day. This is one of the most heinous crimes on the planet. Here in Minnesota, we have the third-largest number of child sexual abuse and child sexual exploitation cases filed in the country.

How did you end up at Our Rescue?

Earlier in my career, I worked in the airline and travel industries, which are active in anti-trafficking. Then I went to Carlson Companies and had the privilege of working for Marilyn Carlson Nelson, who was an early pioneer in the anti-trafficking fight as a global hotelier. Marilyn and Carlson were awarded the first-ever corporate award for preventing trafficking. When I was working for Marilyn, I was able to serve on the White House task force to prevent human trafficking under Secretary John Kerry. That line on my resume tripped some algorithm run by the LinkedIn gods, and a CEO role came into my inbox. I wasn't looking for a job, but this popped up, and I thought, "Oh, that's interesting." I hit the "Easy Apply" button and here I am. This mission found me, and I'm so grateful to be on it.

How long have you been CEO of Our Rescue?

I joined at the end of February [2024]. It's been a whirlwind. When I came into the organization, they had just brought on a new board of directors. Since then, we've brought in a new executive leadership team and expanded operations.

What made you pick Minneapolis for your new corporate headquarters?

There is a great ecosystem here of anti-trafficking nonprofits and NGOs. There are partners here who understand the needs of survivors and law enforcement partners who are well versed in identifying predators and arresting them. There's already a base of strength.

How does the rescue work? What makes it more effective than other anti-trafficking strategies that are currently in place?

We have three parts to our mission: education and prevention, partnerships with law enforcement, and survivor care. We support law enforcement partners with tools, technology, digital forensics training, and canine dogs so they can do the investigative work to identify predators and potential victims. Once we've identified a child or a man or a woman who has been a victim of trafficking, we provide support to get them into survivor care services.

Do you interact with survivors?

There was a ring that was trafficking women from Colombia to Spain. These women showed up in the Canary Islands thinking they were going to get hospitality jobs. Instead, when they landed, their passports were taken and they were immediately brought to a strip club, to a dark basement, in a room with mattresses on the floor and windows that were all bricked up. They were basically locked into a life of sexual servitude.

I was on that mission, in which 18 predators were arrested and 18 women were rescued.

How do you plan to engage local partners?

We've already been in conversations with the local Bureau of Criminal Affairs. They lead the ICAC (Internet Crimes Against Children) investigations into crimes against children. We're working with the Minneapolis Police Department to see how we can build out and support their efforts. We want to provide them with whatever support they need — tools, technology training, and canine dogs that detect storage devices that may contain child sexual abuse material.

We're also looking for a place where we can build a shelter. There are not enough beds for indigenous women and children who are being trafficked. The LGBTQ+ community is also underserved. We're here to fill the gaps. MWP

A Conversation With Beth Holger, The Link

I have been involved with youth experiencing homelessness and trafficking since 1999, right out of college. We've made so much progress since then.

When I first started with youth homelessness, people didn't really even talk about it. The idea was they were simply bad kids who ran away from home because they didn't want to follow rules. There was not much awareness at all about why youth were actually homeless. There were only one or two emergency shelters for youth around the state. Many believed that it didn't happen in suburban and rural areas.

It took many years to get traction with the state legislature. Some people believed Child Protection Services took care of the kids. Many brave young people came forward to share their stories about homelessness, to change the narrative, which led to passage of the Homeless Youth Act. We now have the funds to build shelters, housing, and services.

Wilder research data indicates the numbers of homeless youth have gone down 17 percent between 2018 and 2023. Suburban counties like Dakota, Scott, Carver, Washington, and Anoka now have nonprofits running programs. We have more rural and tribal programming, more in Minneapolis and Saint Paul, and more for LGBTQ+, Black, pregnant, and parenting youth. There also has been tremendous progress on youth trafficking.

In the late 1990s, everyone was referring to young children as teen prostitutes — they were considered criminals even if they were 14 years old. It was horrifying.

One youth got picked up, arrested, charged, placed in a juvenile detention center, and then re-released to a trafficker.

These kids weren't seen as children in need of protective services. They were seen as juvenile delinquents. A lot of us worked hard to get the Safe Harbor Law passed in 2011, which decriminalized prostitution offenses for youth under 16; now it is up to age 18.

We have gone to the legislature to get anti-trafficking curriculum in schools, but it's tough because it involves the word "sex." Getting into schools as early as third grade would be helpful to teach the warning signs of grooming behavior, because traffickers recruit youth that are very young. It is controversial, but traffickers can be quite charming and manipulative, and are getting to children when they are young. We have to get to those children first.

Find the full interview at womenspress.com

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