MINNESOTA WOMEN'S PRESS

The Little Things

WOMENSPRESS.COM | JUNE 2025 | ISSUE 41-6

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Minnesota Women's Press has been sharing the stories of women since 1985, as one of the longest continuously run feminist publications in the country. It is freely available at more than 300 locations.

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.

Minnesota Women's Press LLC
P.O. Box 8137, St. Paul, MN 55108

Vol. 41-6
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Cover: Keiona Cook. See her story on page 12. Photo by Sarah Whiting.

Minnesota Women's Press earned three photography and two writing awards from the Minnesota Newspaper Association for 2024.

Upcoming magazine topics include Co-op Culture (July), Energy (August), Collective Health (September)

WHAT'S INSIDE?

Editor's Letter 3
Little Things Are Big Things

Legacy 4–5
Our 40th Anniversary Celebration

Ecolution 8–9
My Sister Is Exposing Microplastics

Art of Living 10–11
Yes, You Can Create Art

Education 12–13
Crafting Confidence, One Sewing Machine at a Time

Gender-Based Violence 14–15
Improving the First Stop in Trauma Care

Bookshelf 16–18
Everybody Just Breathe

Changemakers Alliance 19
Housing Development, Creativity

LGBTQ+ 23
Pride in Rural Communities

SPECIALTY GUIDES

Elder 6–7
What I Have Been Doing in "Retirement"

Home 20–21
Soil and Air Matter

Classified Ads 22

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DR. LESO MUNALA (L) AND DR. LUCY MKANDAWIRE-VALHMU, PAGE 18

PHOTO SARAH WHITING

"The older I get, the more I'm conscious of ways very small things can make a change in the world. ... The world is made up of tiny matters, isn't it?"

— writer Sandra Cisneros

Little Things Are Big Things

by Mikki Morrissette

The air we breathe. The water we drink. The soil from which our food grows. The building blocks of life are basic elements, without which we could not survive. It can be easy to forget that — unless pollutants corrode these fundamentals.

Similarly, it is little moments and connections that sustain us. Decades ago, in a novel I was writing, I included an elderly woman who encouraged the young protagonist to spend time every evening recollecting a special moment or lesson from that day. I realized recently that I am doing that myself. Especially in these difficult times, I am chronicling in pictures the happy face of my dog; the wizened, crooked trees on my walking paths; the craft cocktails shared with friends; the colorful people I see at festivals and special events.

At our 40th anniversary celebration on May 1, we celebrated three Badass women who exemplify how little things are big things. Each of the women was profiled in our 2024 storytelling, then selected by vote from our Badass members.

Cherilyn Spears was honored for her work developing a healthy and sovereign food system in Red Lake Nation; she was partly inspired to grow it quickly during the pandemic, after TV dinners had become staples at the local food shelf.

Catherine Squires was recognized for writing a commentary that resonated with thousands of readers nationwide, titled "Stress Among Black Women in Academia."

Jessica Stabenow Mager was our third honoree. She was bothered by "not in my backyard" backlash about bringing a youth mental health facility into her neighborhood; she told two friends, and they told two friends. A movement was born in support. The facility is now built and open, serving the needs of vulnerable youth.

These are examples of little things that are big things.

In this issue, we explore the role of art, technovation by a middle-school student, prideful celebration, and a "retirement" rooted in bringing integrity to public service. We also feature excerpts from a memoir by nurse Amanda Peterson, about her experiences during the peak of the pandemic. In a year's time, all but one of her intensive care patients were struggling with COVID.

Her story is a reminder that the air we breathe is a precious resource of life that we share — and that we choose how to protect the interconnected essence of our lives.

Our responsibility as a media platform is to showcase the best of who we are, what we want to build, and how we work to do it together.

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ALL PHOTOS SARAH WHITING

Our 40th Anniversary Celebration

Nearly 150 people celebrated 40 years of Minnesota Women's Press — the longest-running feminist print publication in the U.S. We honored three Badass winners who were featured in our pages in 2024 and chosen by Badass member votes. One of those winners was Cherilyn Spears (above) for her work in food sovereignty in Red Lake.

We celebrated the two cofounders and the long-time publishers (above l–r): Mollie Hoben, Norma Smith Olson, Kathy Magnuson, and Glenda Martin.

We heard nine Power Talks, from Hoben, Christina Ewig, Greta Gaard, Yurie Hong (left), Patricia Torres Ray, Nancy Lyons, Emilia Gonzalez Avalos, Nekima Levy Armstrong, and a pre-recorded talk from Winona LaDuke.

(Below) Four long-time advertisers were honored (l–r): Laurie Serie represented Mary T., an advertiser since 2013; Laurie Eubanks (aka Ms. Greenjeans) is the longest-running advertiser, since 1994; Joan Jakubas of Minnehaha Family Dental has been a loyal advertiser since 2003. Not pictured here is strong supporter Joan Gilles of Financial Planning Partners.

Event sponsors included Unidos MN (director Gonzalez Avalos pictured above), which enabled tabling space for Indivisible Twin Cities and People's March. Mary T.'s sponsorship supported food from Basil Cafe, Root to Rise Kitchen, and Salsa a la Salsa. Minneapolis Foundation offered a table to The Food Group and Peace House for donation collections. Women's Foundation supported tabling space for WISE and Girls Getting Ahead in Leadership, as well as music by Charmaine Douglas. The National Organization of Women and an anonymous donor paid for Badass tote bags for all participants.

Patricia Torres Ray, pictured below with her niece Lina Maria Patiño, gave an impassioned speech about the value in supporting our unique feminist publication.

(Above left) Nekima Levy Armstrong hugs Badass winner Catherine Squires, who was honored for her highly popular commentary about Black women's mental health in 2024.

The third Badass winner, Jessica Stabenow Mager, was honored for her "Yes in My Backyard" work on behalf of a youth mental health facility in her West Saint Paul neighborhood. MWP

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MINNESOTA WOMEN'S PRESS IS HOSTING A SERIES OF CONVERSATIONS THIS SUMMER.

CHANGEMAKERS ALLIANCE

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

Solving for housing, caregiving, and other pain points

We invite our readers to participate in an online discussion about caregiving needs, from birth to elderly. Contact community@womenspress.com to be invited to the discussions.

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What I Have Been Doing in "Retirement"

COURTESY PHOTO

submitted by Chris Meyer

For me — an introvert with a career in information systems, more comfortable with technology than people — the decision to run for Winona County commissioner required a major transformation.

It started after I retired from General Mills in 2013 and was invited by a friend to join a local advisory committee that oversees county parks. An official in the area told us not to talk about climate change, since he believed it was a hoax, and threatened to eliminate the committee if we didn't comply.

Although I lacked many of the skills I thought elected officials should have, this incident sparked something in me. If I was an elected official, I could — at a minimum — make decisions based on the best data and information I could gather, and not based on ideology. I would strive to treat other community members with respect and honesty, as I would like to be treated.

I was not ready to run for elected office, but believed the principles of evidence and inclusion belong in local government. I was appointed to the local county planning commission and was again surprised to find frequent dialogue based on ideology and intimidation.

Two years later, when my county commissioner decided to retire and asked me to run for his seat, I said yes.

In 2017, I attended campaign lessons offered by the Wellstone Foundation and learned that door-knocking is the single most cost-effective strategy. I committed to go to all 3,000 doors in my district.

Remember, I'm an introvert. I didn't know if I could do it. I told myself that making it to every door would be sufficient — a victory for me, regardless of whether I won the election.

That 2018 summer of door-knocking changed me. I didn't enjoy it, and I don't think I'm a very good "politician," but I found that being authentic is good enough and I accepted that. I won the election in 2018, and again in 2022 with the same strategy.

Now I am in my seventh year as a county commissioner. The principles of evidence and inclusion have gotten me through the pandemic, lawsuits, passage of controversial items, numerous budget decisions, and the most difficult part (for me): campaigning.

I've learned that Minnesota county commissioners are extremely important. Minnesota is one of only 11 states in which the county government administers funds for human services and public health. Frequently, the state or federal government fails to fully fund things like disability services, treatment for mental health and substance abuse, or staffing to make sure people who are arrested get social services. It is up to the county to make sure that work gets done, regardless of state and federal funding — which falls onto the local property tax levy. Making sure that my neighbors get the services they need is my responsibility.

Personal pitch: Can you also share your skills in public service? Run for office, or serve on a local advisory committees. Being a "politician" was never what I planned to do. And it certainly is not what I expected in my retirement.

But you might find, as I did, that it is important to bring your own principles to governmental decision-making in your community — important enough that you can overcome whatever obstacles hold you back. MWP

My Sister Is Working to Expose Microplastics

PHOTO SARAH WHITING

submitted by Jasmine Garry

Isabella Garry, pictured at one of her favorite Twin Cities parks, is an innovative middle school student who developed the Enviro app.

Have you ever eaten a credit card? This may seem like an absurd question, but in reality, the average person consumes the rough equivalent of a credit card's worth of plastic every week. That totals nearly half a pound per year, mostly through microplastics and nanoplastics — tiny plastic particles or liquid plastic ingredients found in everyday items such as makeup, toothpaste, laundry detergent, and even clothing.

These invisible plastics can seep through our skin and enter our bloodstream, and have been linked to hormonal imbalances, cancer, and organ damage. When my younger sister Isabella learned about this at nine years old, she took action, and Enviro was born.

Isabella developed the first version of Enviro through the Technovation Challenge, a global tech competition for girls. I had the privilege of being Isabella's mentor throughout the process. My role was to guide her in app development, research, and the pitch process, but it was her passion for environmental health and social impact that truly brought the idea to life. I was her sounding board to brainstorm features, refine the problem statement, and explore solutions to help people avoid nanoplastics in their everyday purchases.

The result was a functional app that can scan a product's barcode, check it against a database of ingredients, and alert the user to any nanoplastics it contains.

The project resonated so much with international audiences that she was chosen to represent America at the World Summit Technovation Challenge in San Francisco, where she pitched her app to Silicon Valley executives. She gained confidence in public speaking and persuaded audiences with her storytelling and ideas.

From 2023 to 2024, she learned about coding and UI/UX design, but also about user needs, data sourcing, and the intricacies of ingredient labeling. One of the biggest challenges Isabella faced was building a custom barcode and ingredient database. Commercial API access was costly, so she had to build her dataset from scratch.

She also discovered through a community survey that users wanted to know more than simply if a product was "bad." They were looking for alternative products, transparency about ingredients in all consumer brands, and better consumer product education. Based on that feedback, Isabella added features — after extensive research — that include healthier product recommendations, ingredient explanations, and visual indicators (like red highlights for nanoplastics).

Currently, as a middle school student, Isabella is working

to improve the app infrastructure so that it can be launched to the public. This includes ongoing research to expand the database by a few hundred products, enhance scan accuracy, and develop a browser extension for alternatives in online shopping.

We plan to build a website with an extension to support online shopping for users, to empower millions of Americans with their decisions as consumers. We are also passionate about making ingredient transparency equitable, ensuring that individuals from all communities can access the information they need — with user-friendly terms rather than scientific names — to protect their health, understand side effects, recognize environmental impacts, and select more skin-friendly options.

In the next 10 years, we hope to continue working together — combining our interests in technology, science, and social impact to build tools that help people make informed decisions, especially regarding health and the environment, whether through Enviro or other platforms.

Importantly, we still make time for fun. I go to college at Yale University, and Isabella will start seventh grade this fall, yet we FaceTime every day, catch up on each other's days, hold each other accountable, and learn together as we keep building projects.

Working on Enviro has taught us that solving real-world problems doesn't require sacrificing creativity or curiosity; in fact, it's often at the intersection of the two where real innovation occurs. With Enviro, we're not just building an app, we're fostering a movement for cleaner, safer living. MWP

Isabella and Jasmine Garry are siblings — from a non-STEM family background — who each developed an interest in web development, apps, and games. Both have participated in the Technovation Challenge.

For more on the issue of microplastics, read a related story in *The Guardian*.

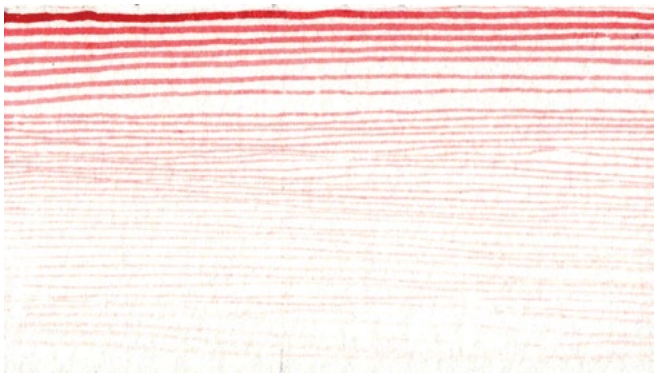
Yes, You Can Create Art

submitted by Jinjer Markley

Art can be terrifying. It might bring up old, embedded feelings of self-doubt. As a teacher, I nurture artistic self-confidence in my meditative watercolor classes by offering incredibly simple art meditations on tiny pieces of paper. These non-intimidating creative experiences help students work through doubt and enjoy creative self-discovery.

A simple meditation to get you started

Drag a brush full of watery paint lightly across the paper to make a thin stripe. Keep the brush on "ballerina toes," barely touching the paper. Repeat until your paper is full of tiny stripes.



Replace judgment with curiosity

Simple tasks are not necessarily easy. It is hard to keep light and even pressure on the brush, or to keep lines straight. A mean inner voice might tell you, "I'm no good at this." Let that judgment go by choosing to be curious! Try changing the angle of your arm, brush, or paper, or the direction of your brushstroke, and ask yourself, "Is this any easier?" Give yourself time to figure it out.

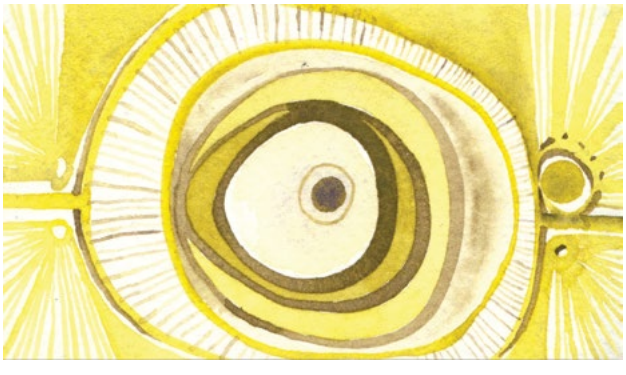
Be fully aware of the present

Any mark on the paper is in the past. Your planned marks are in the future. The present is the place where the tip of the brush is touching the paper, and it's the only place where you have any control.

If you find yourself thinking about what you've done or what you want to do, pause and redirect your eyes to the tip of the brush. You might need to do this often.

Cultivate joy

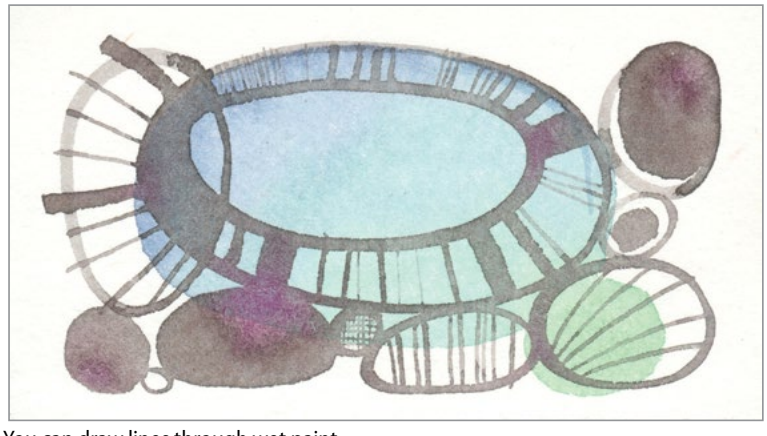
Any time you feel a creative urge, follow it. Bend or break the "rules" as inspiration strikes.



A line can be short or long.

A line does not have to be straight.

You can add lines to the top of dry paint.



You can draw lines through wet paint.

If it feels good, do it again. For example, I love drawing lines through "windows," so I do it often. Notice what is fun for you, and do more of that. MWP

jinjermarkley.com

Jinjer Markley is hosting a workshop for Minnesota Women's Press readers June 7, 3:30–5pm, in Minneapolis. Use the QR code to register.

PHOTO SARAH WHITING

Crafting Confidence, One Sewing Machine at a Time

reported by Siena Iwasaki Milbauer

Tucked into a small basement space in the North Loop neighborhood of Minneapolis is a gem that has been 16 years in the making. The room is filled with brightly colored fabrics — some crafted into one-of-a-kind pieces, others waiting to take shape. Rows of sewing machines line the long central table, waiting to turn potential into actual.

Lovely's Sewing Collective was founded in 2009 by North Minneapolis fashion designer Keiona Cook. "Sewing saved my life," she candidly shared. "I wanted to be for kids [the person] I needed when I was a kid."

Like other long-lasting nonprofits, Lovely's has adapted to survive, hosting a variety of community and private programs. During the peak of COVID, it was a one-woman mask-making operation; Cook used distinctive African wax print fabrics, which are a signature in her fashion line, Qe'Bella Couture. At the heart of Lovely's programming, however, are year-round sewing classes for children and adults. At Lovely's, sewing is just the beginning. Classes also usually include yoga and lunch.

At a festive spring fashion show fundraiser — featuring designs by Lovely's sewers and a Qe'Bella Couture collection — a parent spoke about the powerful impact Lovely's had on her child's confidence and entrepreneurship.

"We're teaching trade skills, but we're also teaching so much more," says Cook. "We help them create. Then we help them sell [what they've created] and we teach them about financial literacy and money management."

Cook believes this holistic approach, integrating broadly applicable life skills into fun and hands-on classes, is one of the most unique and appealing parts of Lovely's.

Sewing tends to be underestimated as a youth activity. That has posed a challenge for Cook in finding financial support. She believes she has been turned

away for grants because sewing is considered a hobby. Cook adds with a chuckle, "I don't know how sewing could be labeled as a hobby, considering the fact that we have to wear clothes every day."

On a recent trip to Ghana, she was delighted to be immersed in a culture that embraces sewing. "So much life," she says. "On every other corner there were sewing schools. So many people were wearing one-of-a-kind pieces."

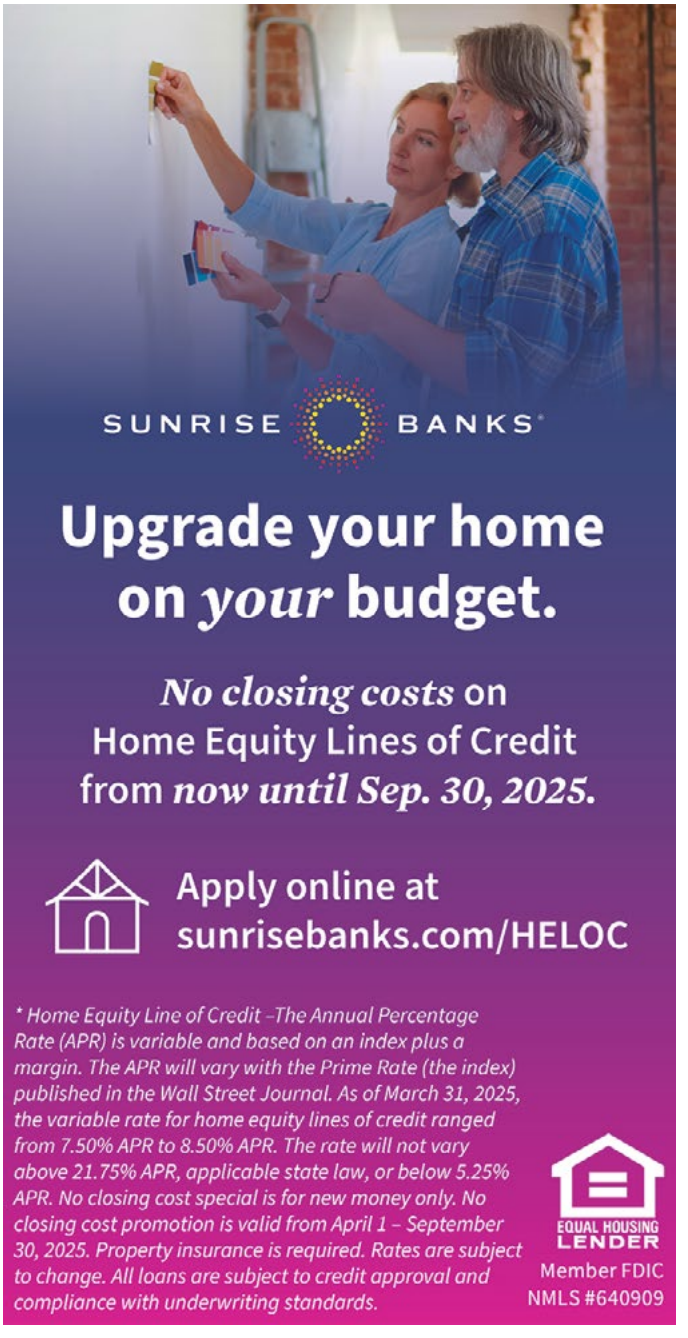
In the U.S., on the other hand, Cook worries that she is not reaching enough kids to make a real dent. "Right now I teach about a hundred kids a year," she says. "I feel like I should be teaching 250 to 300 kids minimum."

Still, Cook is optimistic that with more support she will continue to grow her impact. She wants to offer additional scholarships to students from low-income backgrounds. She offers overnight women's retreats.

"As women, we're busy taking care of all the hearts around us," says Cook. "We forget to take care of our own hearts. [It is meaningful] to create this experience for women to have an overnight retreat, make a dress, with all the expenses paid for."

Cook has a largely volunteer-based teaching staff, and loyal students. "There is so much value in feeling confident and having someone that believes in you. I think that's what stands out about my program — the fact that kids have found a home where they can grow and be the best version of themselves." MWP

Details: lovelyssewing.org



Improving the First Stop in Trauma Care

PHOTO SARAH WHITING

reported by
Alexis Yeboah

Dr. Leso Munala (l) and Dr. Lucy Mkandawire-Valhmu

Nurses sit at a critical intersection in addressing gender-based violence. Their unique and intimate relationship with patients allows nurses to identify patterns of violence, provide trauma-informed support, and advocate for structural and systemic interventions that address root causes.

Dr. Lucy Mkandawire-Valhmu and Dr. Leso Munala, faculty at the University of Minnesota School of Nursing, are addressing gender-based violence and the health disparities faced by survivors. They are using community partnership to train the next generation of health care professionals.

"Violence in the lives of women has an important impact on their health outcomes," explains Mkandawire-Valhmu. "That is our role as nurses. When women are experiencing violence, we can help them to heal. We can assess them properly."

Munala's work with immigrant and refugee women in Chicago revealed profound systemic barriers. "This experience deeply shaped my understanding of how systemic inequities and structural violence disproportionately affected marginalized communities," she reflects.

Health care systems can and often do perpetuate harm when they fail to acknowledge and address historical and ongoing trauma. "Black women and Native women are very hesitant to disclose experiences of violence," Mkandawire-Valhmu explains.

Gender-based violence is much more common than many people realize. According to research published by the Minnesota Women's Foundation and the University of Minnesota Humphrey School of Public Policy, half of Minnesota women report having experienced sexual violence, and one-quarter report

To join an online conversation about addressing gender-based violence in your community, please contact community@womenspress.com with "GBV" in the subject line.

physical violence from an intimate partner.

Because of these understated and consistent numbers, nurse researchers are working in partnership with community organizations to create innovative approaches to provide culturally appropriate and trauma-informed care.

Representation and Mentorship

Addressing the mistrust many communities feel toward health care systems requires fundamental shifts in who provides care and how that care is provided.

Phumulani and Isuroon are examples of organizations that demonstrate the power of community-led initiatives. As the doctors point out, these organizations provide culturally specific interventions and resources to African immigrant and Somali women facing gender-based violence, with programs ranging from health care provider training to legal advocacy. They advance policy at the state and national level that is protective and supportive of survivors of gender-based violence.

However, gaps still exist. "We don't have any Ph.D.-prepared Somali nurses. That representation matters," shares Mkandawire-Valhmu.

Without culturally responsive approaches that acknowledge such lived experiences, health care settings can retraumatize rather than heal.

Community-Centered Solutions in Minnesota

Minnesota has emerged as a leader in addressing gender-based violence through innovative approaches that center community expertise. The state established the nation's first Office of Missing and Murdered African American Women, representing a significant policy advancement. "It's the first of its kind in the nation," notes Mkandawire-Valhmu.

Both professors emphasize that meaningful change must be driven by affected communities themselves.

Says Munala: "Even the most marginalized communities hold the keys to their own empowerment. If we listen, if we support, if we collaborate."

As Minnesota continues attempting to address gender-based violence through health care transformation, the path forward requires sustained commitment to community partnership. In Munala's words, "Health equity and social justice are achievable, but only through collective action."

Resources

- Phumulani: Support services for African immigrant women experiencing gender-based violence
- Isuroon: Health advocacy and support for Somali women in Minnesota
- Minnesota Office of Missing and Murdered African American Women: Policy initiatives and resources
- Nursing Voices of Color: Mentorship program at University of Minnesota School of Nursing
- Violence Free Minnesota: Coalition focused on making Minnesota a violence-free state

Everybody Just Breathe

PHOTO SARAH WHITING

written by
Amanda Peterson

These passages are excerpts from a memoir by a nurse in the intensive care unit who, for nearly a year, cared for patients struggling with COVID. In all that time, all but one of her patients was in critical condition because of the pandemic. Her memoir, *Everybody Just Breathe: A COVID Nurse Memoir of Stamina and Swear Words,* was published by Beaver's Pond Press.

It is October of 2021, and the Delta wave of this pandemic is officially here. … The COVID ICU is being rebuilt this week. The walls that came down in March are going back up. The red signs will return, along with the roar of the airflow — details I wanted to forget, to put away on a shelf in my mind. This wave is harder. We know what is coming now. I am preparing for another winter of rushing air and silent patients. Another Christmas in the trenches. One more round of prayers and profanity.

I am angry now.

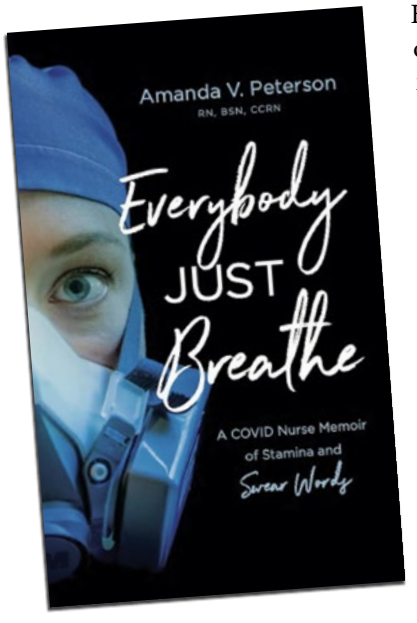
Nurses don't like to talk about anger. We are the care givers. We are not supposed to be mad at humanity. We are supposed to be loving, understanding, and kind. But this is my documentation, and it needs to be said. I am mad. I am mad at humanity for being selfish, for making choices based on individual wants versus the collective need. This unit is going back up because we couldn't band together well enough to protect each other. The anger I feel because of that boils under the surface of my soul right now.

My job is terrific for making me appreciate what I have. I had days off to myself, and I was able to recharge. I could vent to my best friend or my husband after a hard shift. I could take long walks or go to the gym. I could get a massage, or get my nails done. That balance gave me the ability to pour all of me into my life.

In 2020, that all changed for me, as it did for so many others. On March 17, the kids did not go to school. From

that day on, besides my work shifts, our children were with me for something like a million days in a row. Over night, we had to relearn how to be a family, and I had to relearn how to be a wife and mother. We had to learn how to be bored. … I had to learn how to effectively homeschool two small children and, somehow, also get my own schoolwork done. I had to learn to let go of plans and perfection and to just breathe. That became my mantra — just breathe.

I volunteered for the COVID unit in March of 2020. It is now January of 2021, and I have worked a total of two shifts outside of this unit. I have cared for exactly one patient without COVID in nearly eleven months. One. Every patient, every shift, every time, with the same disease. For eleven months. This book is my documentation of life as a COVID ICU nurse on the front lines in Minnesota. By the time COVID hit the Midwest, America was "over" the pandemic. We were not the blindsided ones in New York City, wearing trash bags as personal protective equipment and being cheered on by the world. We had time to prepare for the storm. But what we gained in preparation, we lost in support.



Jack is fake, but his stories are real. Jack is every patient we've had for eleven months. Jack is every COVID patient across the globe. Jack is everyone.

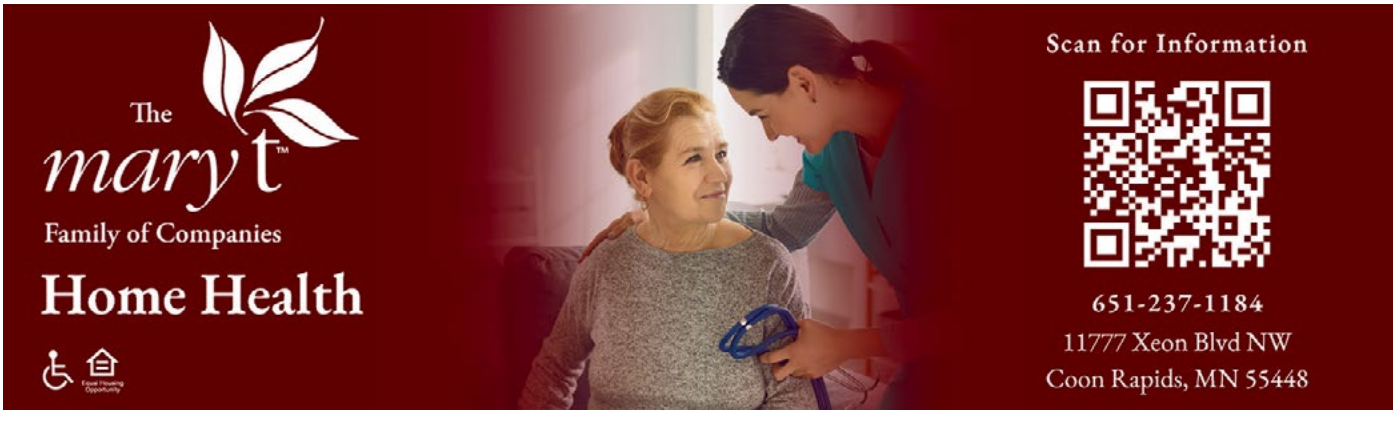
I could pick Jack out of a lineup now, because COVID patients all look the same. Jack is a twentysomething who just had a heart attack from this virus. Jack is a fortysomething whose kids are home alone because both parents are now in the hospital. Jack is a friend's mom. Jack is pregnant with her first child, fighting for two. Jack is a little grandpa, married forty years to the little grandma two rooms down. Jack is hundreds, thousands, hundreds of thousands of stories.

Jack is in my dreams; he is every patient I have laid hands on for nearly a year.

Jack is your neighbor, your mother, your pastor. Jack is the side of this pandemic that I am not supposed to talk about, because nobody can handle it. I can't even handle it. Because Jack could be anyone, and that is why this is hard to write. Jack is all of us.

Jack got sick a little over a week ago. He comes in feeling lousy, achy, and oh-so-tired. He might have a fever. He might be dehydrated from diarrhea or vomiting. He has a cough and is feeling short of breath. His family is sick too, but he is the worst so far. His blood pressure is a little low, but nothing scary. His labs show that his body is inflamed, fighting a little too hard. We admit him, and the marathon begins.

We are slowly getting into the groove, now, as a COVID-nurse house. I have a spot in the garage where I undress after shifts. I strip, sanitize, and scoot naked into our home. If everyone is in the living room, my husband will holler to the kids so they know to stay away, and I can dash up to the bathroom to shower.



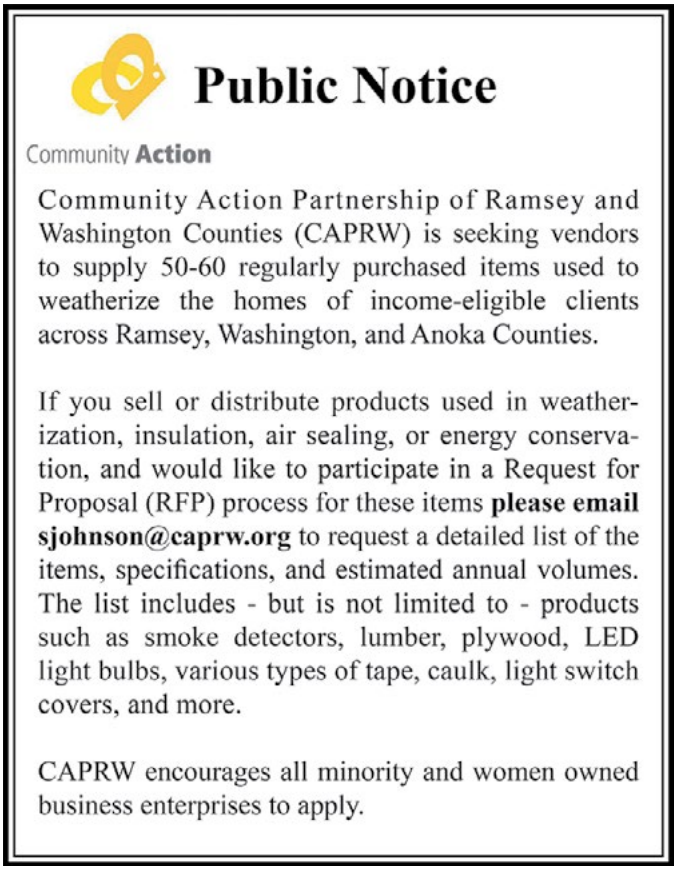
One day, they were all sitting on the couch as I came inside. As I walked into the house, I heard my husband yell, "Shields up! Mom's home!" and the whole family pulled blankets over their heads as I streaked by. The kids were giggling, and it made the whole scenario less scary, and more ridiculous.

My youngest hates not being able to hug me as soon as I get home. The fact that he has to learn this behavior makes my heart ache. The kid-hugs after my shower are good for my soul.

At work, I feel more. Everything is different. There is this undercurrent of activity, everything is moving, planning, and changing. Protocols are popping up. New training is taking place. The halls are empty, but there is more chatter, more activity, more happening within the walls of the hospital. I feel COVID everywhere. In every conversation and every locked eye over our masks. Even in the silence of the empty rooms, I can feel the patients coming. There is this feeling of waiting for the impending wave of hospital admissions. We are all waiting together. We are all quietly reaching toward the wire.

At home I feel it too. Everything just feels. My kids, adjusting to their new normal, have waves of this "more" that I am feeling. Emotions are stronger; tears come easier. They ask me if I am happy. They check on me. I have waves of electric energy and an exhaustion to my core, like I've cried so long that I've worn myself to sleep, but there have been no tears.

And yet the joy is more, also. Because we are in this charged bubble, everything seems more precious and more fleeting. The joy hits like sunlight after a storm, and I can feel the warmth to my toes. All I want to do is bathe in it and memorize the moments, like I'm watching them back in a highlight reel from the future. MMP



What's New at womenspress.com

story development designed for stronger conversations about statewide values, solutions, and action steps

PHOTO MIKKI MORRISSETTE

Nevaeh (l) and Patience join their father Adriane Epps in breaking ground, alongside TWOIE operations and project manager Anastasia Hill (r).

From the "Creativity & Connection" Newsletter

Deborah Jiang-Stein shares an excerpt from her new short story collection, which is "loosely founded in my work speaking in prisons and drug rehab centers around the country where I am a witness to human vulnerability."

womenspress.com/perspective

Recent Commentary

From "Finding the Words to Make a Difference, on Mother's Day," by Liz Sjaastad: "When I was an adult, a psychiatrist diagnosed Mom with schizophrenia. Suddenly, things made more sense."

womenspress.com/commentary

"Where Do We Go From Here?" Series

We featured a story about an emerging developer who received funding to build a new affordable home in a red-lined neighborhood that previously did not allow Black residents to buy or build there. After reading our story, a community investor offered the developer a bridge loan to build in North Minneapolis.

If you want to be part of upcoming online discussions about housing, caregiving (children to elderly), health care, gender-based violence, and gun protection, reach out to community@womenspress.com.

Ecolution

We begin a summer of storytelling about Ecolution, the term we coined for restoring local economies and ecosystems. How is your community developing a co-op culture or creating green energy? Send story ideas to editor@womenspress.com with Ecolution in the subject line.

In the meantime, find our news story about PFAS (per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances) — "forever chemicals" — which supplements the solutions story about microplastics in this issue.

womenspress.com/ecolution

Thanks to 2025 underwriters to date, who support Changemakers Alliance content development

Joan Gilles / Financial Planning Partners, Minneapolis Foundation, Our Lady of Peace, Press Forward Minnesota, Unidos, Valvoline in Northern Minnesota, as well as deep support from Kristin Siegesmund, Michelle and Bill Pohlad, and more than 250 Badass members

Soil and Air Matter

submitted by Geanella Ochoa

Growing up in Ecuador, I saw firsthand how environmental degradation destroys communities, local economies, and traditional ways of life. I was born in Pujilí, a small Andean city in Ecuador, surrounded by the mountains and rural communities that shape the identity of my homeland. Over time, my family acquired a property in Isinche de Alpamalag, a nearby rural area known for its extremely dry climate and soil damaged by lack of water. What struck me wasn't just the dryness of the land, but the contrast brought on by climate change.

Motivated by our commitment to climate justice, my family and I decided to transform that dry land. Through reforestation, soil care, and the reintroduction of native plants, we turned an arid space into a green refuge full of life. Today, birds, butterflies, bees, and trees thrive — proof that resilience is possible.

Perhaps the most powerful part of this experience has been the impact on my daughters, who were six and eight years old when we began four years ago. They've been involved from the start: planting trees with their own hands, caring for the land, and witnessing the transformation firsthand. They've learned to respect nature's cycles, to understand the value of water, and to feel a deep responsibility for Mother Earth. Watching them grow up with that awareness fills me with hope.

My Career in Environmental Justice

For more than a decade, I worked for the government of Ecuador. I represented my country in negotiations at the United Nations level about climate issues. I also served at

the Consulate of Ecuador in Minneapolis on human mobility issues. Now I work on both of these issues as the new director of environmental justice for COPAL. Our work addresses green jobs, pollution reduction, an equitable transition to clean energy, and the root causes of forced migration due to climate change and extractive economies.

Climate migration is happening. Many people, especially in Latin America, are forced to leave their homes due to droughts, floods, or crop failures. Understanding this is key to building more humane and effective policies.

There are grassroots organizations led by women and people of color that are making a difference in renewable energy, urban farming, and more. In Minnesota, we need to invest in these community-led models and ensure that green opportunities are accessible to Latino families and other historically excluded communities.

COURTESY PHOTO

The Value of Sustainable Soil

Soil health is the foundation of both human and planet health. Healthy soil provides better food, sequesters carbon, and retains water — helping to combat climate change. Every home garden can be a small act of environmental justice.

When we talk about healthy soil, we're referring to much more than just fertile ground for planting. Truly healthy soil is a living ecosystem containing millions of microorganisms — bacteria, fungi, actinomycetes, and protozoa — as well as larger organisms, such as earthworms and nematodes. These organisms break down organic matter, recycle nutrients, improve soil structure, and help plants absorb essential minerals. When we compost kitchen scraps, add dry leaves, or avoid using chemicals, we're feeding that invisible life that keeps the earth alive.

In Ecuador, this agro-ecological approach has gained strength in regions where Indigenous and peasant cooperatives have promoted the use of compost, biofertilizers, and green manures to regenerate soils and reduce dependence on agrochemicals.

In communities like Zumbahua and Salinas de Guaranda, soil restoration through organic practices has led to improved yields of potatoes, maize, and vegetables, while also protecting water sources and the health of local families. By keeping these organisms alive and active, farmers reduce the need for chemicals and preserve ecological balance.

How to Support Healthy Soil and Air

The texture, color, and smell of soil offer clues. Healthy soil tends to be loose, dark from organic matter, and has a pleasant, almost sweet smell. Most importantly, it has the ability to regenerate, to filter water, and to support biodiversity. Small changes, like planting native trees, can have lasting and profound effects.

The same goes for air. Every breath we take may carry particles that affect our health. Burning fossil fuels, trash, pesticide sprays, dust from unpaved roads, and smoke from wood stoves release pollutants like nitrogen dioxide, carbon monoxide, ground-level ozone, and fine particulate matter (PM2.5). These tiny particles are especially dangerous; they're small enough to enter the lungs and bloodstream, and are directly linked to illnesses like asthma, cardiovascular disease, lung cancer, and developmental issues in children.

Small things like walking or biking instead of driving, avoiding open burning, caring for green spaces, and advocating for clean policies may seem simple, but they have a multiplying effect when done collectively.

Caring for the soil and the air is not just an environmental act: it's a deeply human and community-driven one.

A clear example of this challenge can be found in La Victoria, a rural area in my hometown of Pujilí. Known for its beautiful clay pottery, the community also faces a hidden environmental and health crisis. For decades, artisans have used lead from old car batteries in their firing kilns because it's a cheaper option. This practice, sustained by lack of environmental education and access to clean technology, has contaminated the air with toxic particles, degraded the soil, affected nearby water sources, and endangered the health of people, flora, and fauna.

It's a powerful reminder of how small decisions can have large consequences, and of the urgent need to support communities in transitioning toward safer and more sustainable production methods. MWP

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Pride in Rural Communities

submitted by Julie Walker

All rural communities have queer residents. This is not a new phenomenon. I have met folks from all demographics — including people returning to the region after attending college and farmers who have been here 40 years.

Two years ago, Twin Cities Pride offered free participation in a developmental conference for organizers. Along with other rural colleagues, we have since been able to develop from the mentorship of Prides around the country. We now have a Pride nonprofit that seeks resources, sponsorships, and other empowering ways to support rural Pride celebrations. No two Pride celebrations are the same, just as no two rural communities are the same. However, we can share resources to streamline the planning of these events so we can focus on the nuances in our communities.

In January, Twin Cities Pride organized the Midwest Pride Summit, which included 70 people from at least 25 communities around Minnesota and neighboring states.

Our efforts in Marshall have benefited tremendously from the mentoring, including around improvements to our processes and safety measures. Willmar hosted its first Pride celebration at Intuition Brewery, with more planned this summer as well as monthly events. For three years, Jade Moorse has been developing vendor relationships, with forms and processes to vet alignment with our values.

The YES! House is in the beginning stages of planning its first Pride celebration event in the Granite Falls community.

Queer folks have always been in Southwest Minnesota. We are excited to celebrate the entirety of their identities in community together.

Unfortunately, security must be a part of any Pride celebration. The politics of today can be scary in isolation, which is intended to oppress and exert control. Yet, working together, we are a force for positive change that reflects our community values. I am proud of the work my colleagues around the state are doing and their ability to bounce ideas off each other and share contacts.

In Marshall, for example, we have like-minded folks who raise their voices as allies in support of queer folks. We talk openly together about negative comments or potential threats to events we're hosting, which means we as a community are mutually supporting the plans. Some have faced backlash and accusations for the support, but we have family and friends saying, "How can I help?"

Massive Pride celebrations in major urban areas are beautiful and powerful — it is almost a religious experience to feel the collective safety and pride of that many like-minded people. Our rural Prides look and feel different. Especially with the attacks on equity, people want to do something to make the world better. For many, planning Pride celebrations is a great way to do that. MWP

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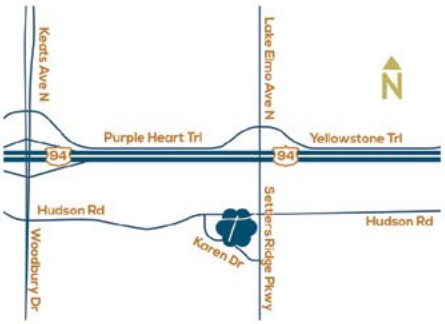

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