Inside Freedom House
West 7th's sixth Homeless Shelter

Listening House, a nonprofit based in St. Paul that provides hospitality and resources to homeless people during the day, is planning to break ground on a new location last January in the St. Paul Fire Department’s “Freedom House” building (296 W. 7th St.).

Molly Jamna, executive director of Listening House, joined the organization in 2020 after working in housing and social services outreach throughout the Twin Cities.

What drove you to get involved in working to serve homeless people?
I was a political science major in college, and in the direction I wanted to take. I had been working part time for a political affairs firm, doing polling and advanced data work with organizations like the White House and Secret Service. It was exciting, but I found I didn’t have time for anything else that was important to me so I decided I wanted to get a job I could punch in and out of and while I made up my mind about what I wanted to do with my life, I thought I would work the front desk at the Hotel Continental in downtown Minneapolis, which was traditional hospitality for single people experiencing homelessness.

This was a transformative experience. I saw that the difference between my situation and the people living there was finances, so I went car fixed or access to a basement to crash in. Without that help, people often end up homeless and then everything else slips away. It’s difficult to maintain a sobriety program, for example, or to take your meds, if you don’t have a home. I transitioned after that to working as a property manager for a building called the Archdale which offered services for homeless people and runaway youth, then worked in the disabilities sector. Eventually, I went back to school for a masters in nonprofit management, and I saw how much I liked the business side. I decided I wanted to have a hand in building institutions that were good to work and volunteer at and in making nonprofits didn’t fall into traps of paternalism and repeat cycles of white supremacy. I learned from my experience that people need autonomy, they need choices, and it’s not up to people like me to decide what those choices are and how much autonomy you get. I wanted to be a part of a model that helps people to be able to replicate.

FREEDOM HOUSE, PG 3

THE SHOWERS, THE FOOD, THE CLOTHES AND LAUNDRY MACHINES, THEY'RE ALL IMPORTANT TO ME, SO I DECIDED I WANTED TO IF YOU DON'T HAVE A HOME. I TRANSITIONED AWAY. IT’S DIFFICULT TO MAINTAIN A SOBRIETY PROGRAM, FOR EXAMPLE, OR TO TAKE YOUR MEDS, IF YOU DON’T HAVE A HOME. I TRANSITIONED AFTER THAT TO WORKING AS A PROPERTY MANAGER FOR A BUILDING CALLED THE ARCHDALE WHICH OFFERED SERVICES FOR HOMELESS PEOPLE AND RUNAWAY YOUTH, THEN WORKED IN THE DISABILITIES SECTOR. EVENTUALLY, I WENT BACK TO SCHOOL FOR A MASTERS IN NONPROFIT MANAGEMENT, AND I SAW HOW MUCH I LIKED THE BUSINESS SIDE. I DECIDED I WANTED TO HAVE A HAND IN BUILDING INSTITUTIONS THAT WERE GOOD TO WORK AND VOLUNTEER AT AND IN MAKING NONPROFITS DIDN’T FALL INTO TRAPS OF PATERNALISM AND REPEAT CYCLES OF WHITE SUPREMACY. I LEARNED FROM MY EXPERIENCE THAT PEOPLE NEED AUTONOMY, THEY NEED CHOICES, AND IT’S NOT UP TO PEOPLE LIKE ME TO DECIDE WHAT THOSE CHOICES ARE AND HOW MUCH AUTONOMY YOU GET. I WANTED TO BE A PART OF A MODEL THAT HELPS PEOPLE TO BE ABLE TO REPLICATE.

Building an Antiracist Community

Defunding History

TIM JOHNSON

Columnist

In 1857 Grey traveled by train, stagecoach and steamboat to St. Anthony Falls, where she made her home with her two-year-old son, Carley. After the death of her father, a formerly enslaved man who went on to be a businessman and activist with the Underground Railroad, Grey became a leader in the Abolitionist movement and other civic engagement groups that helped build the Twin Cities.

Grey's influence in Minnesota and its communities are stories that most folks have never heard. Grey is the first person one encounters in the new Minnesota History Center exhibit, Extraordinary Women.

The life of Emily Goodridge Grey and the many other women who have had a profound influence in Minnesota and its communities is firmly in line with other efforts to ignore or straight out deny.

Kiffmeyer’s initiative to defund history is firmly in line with other efforts to silence and deny a fuller accounting of our history that tells the story of heroic men (along with the occasional woman) who brought Christianity and “civilization” to a land that was uniracial. It was a “Manifest Destiny” themed and virulent in every way, with any blemishes like maltreatment of Native people or slavery having long ago been rectified. For many, many years, this was indeed the story told by the Minnesota Historical Society. The problem for Kiffmeyer and her colleagues is that the Historical Society has begun waking up to the incompleteness of this whitewashed version of history and began giving voice to people like Emily Goodridge Grey, Sarah Berger Sterns, Marie Bottineau Baldwin and many others. These women’s untold stories often remind us of a part of our state history that many prefer to forget, ignore or straight out deny.

Kiffmeyer’s initiative to defund history is firmly in line with other efforts to silence and deny a fuller accounting of our nation’s history by passing laws prohibiting the teaching of critical race theory in schools, which at its core is an effort to look truthfully and honestly at the role racism and white supremacy played in our nation’s founding and continue playing to this day. Emily Goodridge Grey, with her disruptive actionist history, represents a fuller picture of who we are as Minnesotans, Grey’s story, and others like it, can either be perceived as a threat we must ignore or welcomed as a voice reminding us of our potential and who we might yet become.

Tim Johnson is a retired pastor of the United Church of Christ.

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NEWS

Sustainable Change

BY HIMANSHU SHARMA, MD

A family physician who specializes in geriatrics, one of the most valuable services that I offer is the home visit. This provides more information than a clinic visit as a home visit allows the phy...
How to you view the role of Listening House in St. Paul?

The Minnesota Multi Housing Association, which represents property owners, has condemned the St. Paul effort and argued that rent control could weaken the city’s affordable housing shortage. “Should the

rent control ordinance be on the ballot we are confident that the voters of St. Paul will reject this extreme measure,” the group said in a statement Tuesday. “The proposal will only discourage investment in St. Paul, especially in housing, and make rental housing less accessible for new residents.”

JFS Therapist Receives Award

The Jewish Family Service of St. Paul (JFS) therapist Beth Johnson, LMFT, recently received the Founding Mother’s Award from Minnesota Women in Psychology, an organization of women in the field of psychology established in 1977. The award is given to a person who has “made a difference in the field of psychology, in the MWWP organization and in the lives of women or children.” Beth is a board member and editor for the organization.

Landmark Center’s Music on the Porch

The free outdoor music series will continue Wednesdays from July 14-Aug. 4, 3pm. Lineup includes Lena Elizabeth on July 14, a singer/ songwriter based in Minneapolis who has been influenced by folk storytelling and blues rhythms; Michael Monroe on July 21, called “MN Accoustic Music Master” by the Star Tribune; the Red Hot Django Peppers on July 28th and more. Visit landmarkcenter.org.

St. Paul Ranked 12th Best Cycling City

The lawnstarter.com ranking, which examined factors including the length of bicycling lanes, the share of workers who bike to work, access to bike stores and air quality found St. Paul to be among the top cities in the nation. Minneapolis also ranked highly, coming in 5th place.

Pay Gap Comedy and Music Summer Series

Each Sunday, July 4-Aug. 22, 2pm and 5pm (928 7th St. W.) will feature comedy and music series made by women for everyone. This series is produced by Rock What You Got, a social enterprise that elevates female voices in the Twin Cities. It is named the Pay Gap because women still earn only 82 cents to the dollar that men do and performance lineups remain overwhelmingly male-centric. This spotlight on hilarious female enterprise that elevates female voices is presented by the Minnesota Multi Housing Association and sponsored by Red Rock Honda.

The Porch is an outdoor community space that is used for musical performances, art exhibits, and other events. It is located on the grounds of Landmark Center and is open to the public.

 thể

in a world where they are too often met with distrust and help them problem solve.

There have been residents and local business owners raising voices in recent months about increases in crime in the blocks surrounding the Freedom House location since it opened in January. How you do respond to those complaints, and what should be done about them? I see those as important concerns. During COVID, the people who were met with the same response: their maladaptive behaviors, any chemical dependency or mental issues they might struggle with. The biggest difference between these people and anyone else is that they don’t have the money to have options to go places. I think some of the concerns in the neighborhood was because of seeing an increase in nuisance activity and crime related to the pandemic. What the neighborhood has experienced over the past year may not be an increase in statistics as much as an increase in the visibility of certain behavior, with skyways, fast food restaurants and libraries closed. Obviously,
Community Nourishment
The Origins and Sustenance of Community Reporter

Editor’s note: In recognition of the 50th anniversary of the Community Reporter, this issue continues our series of articles exploring the newspaper’s history. See also: Paul Bard’s history below of some of the most significant stories of the newspaper’s history.

by Neal Gosman

About fifty years ago, the West 7th community was being invented. The West End, built along the road from downtown to Fort Snelling, was the oldest area of European-American settlement of what is now the city of St. Paul. Around 1838, Big Eye Farrant set up camp in Fountain Cave by the Mississippi River, downstream from the fort — where, according to Taconia Avenue would be if it reached that far today. His hoofingleg operation had been haimed from the military settlement.

At the other end of the West 7th community was Irvine Park, the oldest neighborhood stand of houses in the state — first platted in 1849 and with homes dating back to the 1850s.

By the early 1970s, the West End had become the site of a number of tightly defined, separately established neighborhoods — including communities of homeless peoples and others strong roots to the area’s history remained in institutions such as the various hospitals, the CSPH, Hall, and unions such as those representing the Schmidt Brewery, the Omaha railroad shops, and other craft workers — but many were facing challenges. In 1970, the 7th-7a area was divided between two different state representatives. Even within the St. Paul government, it fractured, with city council members then being elected city-wide rather than based on local Ward representation. Neighborhoods were defined as Jefferson and Adams, based on the existing elementary school boundaries. The hospital complex along Smith Avenue had not yet displaced the residential rooming houses. Seven Corners was still a viable small business district, the Xcel Center only on the drawing boards.

The main determining boundary of what was to define “West 7th” was cut into the earth — the home-displacing middle of what became I-35E beginning in the 1960s. Once the neighborhoods were closed and the freeway erected, the West 7th became disconnected from the rest of St. Paul.

In 1967, LB’s Great Society came to St. Paul. The Ramsey County Citizens Committee on Economic Opportunity, thereafter Ramsey Action Programs (RAP) — and now called Community Action Partnership of Ramsey and Washington Counties — was set up as the local body to administer the federally funded anti-poverty program in St. Paul. It was controlled by a large voluntary board of directors which was mandated to include “citizen participation” from among the population to be served.

That meant that one-third of the board had to be from among the “poor people” targeted by the program. The concept of citizen participation was a value carried on from the days of the Progressive movement of the early 20th century. RAP identified four “target areas” in St. Paul based on census identified low-income areas. The portion of West 7th inside the I-35E boundary was one of them.

At Area Target Advisory Council (TAAC) a set up and staffed at an old recreation building at the corner of what is now Smith and Grand. (The site is now part of the United Hospital campus.) Thus was the origin of the West Seventh Community Center, now part of Keystone.

A number of federally funded staff and programs operated out of there. Some VISTA volunteers (as called “domestic Peace Corps” workers) were based there. From 1970-71, I was one of the VISTA volunteers.

I had just graduated from college back East, and the War on Poverty program gave me a temporary deferment from the draft. I moved to West 7th and got involved. I was picketed up by Kathy Vadnais and others and remade into the newspaper you have in your hands.

Vadnais was a young mom transplanted to the neighborhood’s affordable housing. She brought with her a family of four little kids along with a background in journalism. The Community Reporter was a way for her to actively contribute to the need for community improvement while being able to stay at home with her children.

Over the years, the Community Reporter has been a main source of communications for the many conversations and actions needed to maintain community control and a sense of place and belonging. Growing with the St. Paul neighborhood press movement of the 70s and 80s, the Community Reporter is a survivor.

Depending on the efforts and support of local resident volunteers, a small cadre of paid professionals and a steady crew of local advertisers, Long may it live.

Neal Gosman, a granddad of many and husband of Minnesota Senator Sandy Pappas, is currently a union officer at MSF airport.

Lessons from our Past

BY PAUL BARD

In the June edition of the Community Reporter, Margaret Kinney wrote about this newspaper celebrating 50 years of giving voice to the residents of St. Paul’s West End. Kinney mentioned some of the parallels between issues facing the neighborhood in those early days and the issues that we face today. This article returns to the archives for another look back — and some thoughts about moving forward.

FROM FREEWAY TO PARKWAY

As physical changes in the neighborhood nothing had a bigger impact over the last 50 years than highway construction. Interstate 35E cut a wide swath through our neighborhood in the mid-1970s, just as it is cutting through downtown St. Paul and the Rondo neighborhood a decade earlier. The result was the loss of hundreds of homes, stores of business and a significant part of our history. The Community Reporter followed the efforts of neighbors to protect 35E (aka “RIP35E”), a community group that tried to halt construction.

While they failed to stop the freeway altogether, this group did succeed in achieving the “parkway” designation and in mitigating some of the freeway’s harmful effects — reducing the speed limit, adding landscaping and lowering the grade of the freeway at the base of Ramsey Hill. Neighborhood involvement made these beneficial changes possible in the same way that neighborhood involvement today in design changes - we hope - in the Riverview Corridor LRT project.

BEAUTY VS. THE BULLDOZER

As people struggled through a sordid Irene Park today, few probably realize the severely depleted state it was in back in the 70s. They’d be surprised to learn that the beautiful Victorian fountain was not even there, the current fountain having been replicated from photos of the 19th century original. In fact, every one of the homes on the park faced the very real possibility of being demolished.

Free lunchtime concerts from Landmark Center’s Market Street porch. Full details at landmarkcenter.org or call 651.292.3063.

Lessons, PG 7
In the Community

The Other Epidemic

BY TIM RUSMEY, MD

On the day we discovered that his colon cancer had returned, the first thing Mr. Thomas Mitchell asked was how my 96-year-old dad in hospice was doing.

Mitchell’s cancer declared itself in a 2004 colonoscopy that removed the offending polyp. Twelve inches of colon were taken out in a 2010 surgery.

On the day, Thomas had returned to the clinic to test his resurgent cancer, he was in to get a CAT scan, blood tests and hospice visits of a new colonoscopy finding.

Thomas was grateful for the good health insurance from his job at Johnson Bros Distributing, down West 7th off Shepard Road.

In a previous “In the Community” piece (May 2021), I reflected on how Mitchell took extraordinarily good care of each and every one of his 24 health conditions. He beat diabetes, TB, a brain aneurism, prostate cancer, even COVID in the midst of a pandemic before a vaccination was available. But sadly, his life was altered by another epidemic, both national and local: gun violence.

On a Monday evening, June 28, 2018 Thomas’ 16-year-old son, Denzel, was sitting in a rocking chair on his grandfather’s porch in Chicago, talking to friends. Suddenly, out of the dark, four youths opened fire. A fatal bullet pierced his heart, continuing through the wall of the house and shattering his grandmother’s curio cabinet.

According to The Economist, this increase was due to widespread fear, COVID, and access to firearms. “The other epidemic” is relentless.

Daily Beast

In May 2021, following a two-and-a-half hour shooting spree by four youths, Mitchell’s 16-year-old stepson shot 10 times in North St. Paul in January.

His 21-year-old stepson, Denzel, was sitting in a rocking chair on his grandfather’s porch in Chicago, talking to friends. Suddenly, out of the dark, four youths opened fire. A fatal bullet pierced his heart, continuing through the wall of the house and shattering his grandmother’s curio cabinet.

A schedule highlights resource events to guests.

FREEDOM HOUSE, PG 3

that’s starting to change now, which is a welcome sight for everybody.

I don’t have any criticism for neighbors who are concerned—we all want to live in a place where neighbors are watching out for each other. Homelessness isn’t something that’s comfortable, and it’s often to find unacceptable. People who don’t have enough money or services is not something that anyone wants in our city.

We should be able to have enough resources in place to help people, and Freedom House is part of that. There’s no arresting our way out of homelessness. Having chemical dependency or mentally illness or living an extreme poverty are not crimes. And if someone isn’t committing a crime, they’re not going to jail, so if they’re not a threat to themselves or others, they’re not going to be sent to the hospital.

The person who’s in the middle of a crisis, may they’re loud, maybe they’re standing in traffic. That’s disruptive, and we need to do something.

These challenges require additional services—other organizations working to build relationships so that we can get these people inside and places like Listening House where they can get connected to those organizations. Sometimes it takes months for us to develop relationships and earn the trust of vulnerable people. That allows us to make inroads, to talk with a friend I’ve gotten to know for example, and say, “Are you sure you don’t want to try a shelter tonight?” Or “Are you sure you don’t want to go to detox and try treatment again?”

We don’t want to have adversaries in the neighborhood, and we want every business to thrive. We want to figure out how we can all coexist. And we think it’s a good thing that people aren’t comfortable with this level of need and homelessness.

What can be done? Community partnerships are one vital part of the solution.

Mara Gentilel, president of an antiracism training program called Talking Changes, documented the following: The St Paul Healing Streets Project provides outreach from the Ramsey County Public Health Department. The Coalition of Asian American Leaders in St Paul focuses on housing, good jobs, and access to mental health.

As a larger community, we must not allow ourselves to be intimi- dated by the big problems we need to tackle—like job opportunities, housing, education, mental health trauma and racial inequity.

Existential threats, from gun violence to cancer, have never held back Mitchell from achieving what he aims to. In fact, in part as a result of how he persistently sought out the care he needed, Thomas has contained his colon cancer. When he told me of that news, we celebrated together. And, I told him my father was doing better and said he needed to report himself as a hospice patient impersonator.

By Sara Fleetham, external relations director at Listening House, joined the organization in January after more than a decade leading non-profits based in St. Paul.

What do you view as some of the most important resources the Freedom House facility provides?

At the planning committee meeting at the end of May, one of the comments that the Radus case worker made was that Listening House was where they are able to meet clients and give them help. In addition to being here is allowing all the programs who work with homeless people to have a place to meet face-to-face with clients.

Ramsey County isn’t meeting face-to-face post-COVID yet. We are one of the only places in St. Paul where case workers can meet with clients privately to do things like chemical dependency or housing assessments. These are the meetings that allow homeless people to ensure they’re correctly completed applications to get on the housing lists and to see where they are in the queue, to get their needs.

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How have you worked to manage the challenges of serving a large population of homeless people, many of whom suffer from mental illnesses and other challenges, in this densely populated part of the city?

FREEDOM HOUSE, PG 6

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A schedule highlights resource events to guests.

"We think it’s a good thing that people aren’t comfortable with this level of homelessness. We shouldn’t be scared, but if we’re comfortable, we’re going to stop looking for solutions."
I remembered his birthday and asked if he celebrated we have on June 30th for my birthday? I told him about the big birthday. He said, “How’d you know it’s birthday. So I went running after him checking a guest in and because I knew the people they are. Earlier today, I was a connection with me and are seen for him every few weeks.

Within a few years, I had worked in almost developmentally disabled. My second job volunteering in high school with the organization and within a week he was hooked up with work shoes, a bus card. With a friend, I moved him in with the paperwork. I was dealing with was finding a place that already things are much easier. I got a bed homeless for two-and-a-half years until that you can get to your job from. I was homeless for two-and-a-half years ago, but I am not anymore, and already things are much easier. I got a bed in Mary Hall. Before that, one of the issues I was dealing with was finding a place that was accessible to where I needed to be. I want to find a place to stay in St. Paul because it is where I work and I love this city. The staff at Freedom House helped me with the paperwork.

I am not a good reader, but I can spend a lot of time with a document and figure out what it means. Some people cannot read or write, and they are never going to be able to fill out an application without help. Without this place, I also come because this is like my second home, my family. They are not going to let anything happen to me, and I am not going to do anything to help them. I volunteer here because I love it. They even though I have a place to sleep, I am grateful that Freedom House provided this place to me because of the resources it hooks you up with. My phone and wallet got stolen last week. The folk here are helping me get my new state ID, social security card and a food stamp card. I can send my own phone back by working, but those government programs are a lot more difficult. There is an array of paperwork.

At most night shelters, you have to wait until the morning to get resources, and sometimes they do not come through like they are supposed to. You are constantly waiting and waiting. A person gets so frustrated with waiting. At Freedom House, there is not so much waiting. Whenever you need they give it right to you. I am going in to get my state ID tomorrow because of them, and I will have my ID and a card. When I heard that, I felt like I was going to cry. If every place could be like Freedom House, I don’t think we would be in the predicament we’re in.

What is the most surprising part of what we do?

Simply being a stable force, a constant in the lives of some of the homeless people do not have stable situations. It’s incredibly rewarding to know in the back of their mind that their lives are safe. We just seeing someone a few times a week who will remember them by name and the ins-and-outs of what they’re going through is motivation.

How did you decide to work in social services?

I grew up adjacent to unsheltered communities. My mom worked at an organization that helped those people and she was passionate. Promise and her whole life philosophy was that we’d gotten so much from others and we needed to give back. She worked at Mercy House of Hope for 20 years before coming over to the ER. She was my first volunteer positions working with unsheltered folks. Out of college, I did service work, working with refuge students to do a summer school immersion so they could learn English. When I came back to Minnesota, I wanted something that would keep me tied into the community and the homeless community and the way that I had been taught to.

Are there any guests that you find yourself thinking about even when you are not working with them?

Most of the time, there is one guest in particular who was looking and looking for a job for so long, and nothing was working out. Eventually, he ended up getting one but it was a ten hours on your feet job, which he didn’t have resources for. I didn’t do the best job of helping him, for instance. We connected him with a partner organization and within a week he hooked up with work shoes, a bus card. He’s had that job for three months now. He comes in from time to time and I know how work is going.

Anwar, a guest of Freedom House and a frequent volunteer, tells us about his life. ‘How did you get into this, what do you find most valuable?’

You get state IDs taken care of, housing taken care of, so you can go to the library, buy books, TV. Just having the community and the kind of programs that are allowed to fill out an application without help. In the beginning, we were just doing fireside chats, but now we do that more regularly. We will probably not have that bed in Mary Hall. I probably would not have a job or a food for today.

Now that you have a home, what keeps you coming to Freedom House?

I love this place. I do not have to come here anymore, but I want to. They keep me occupied and away from danger away from being from being a problem in trouble with other people. That is why I continue to come. I also come because this is like my second home, my family. They are not going to let anything happen to me, and I am not going to do anything to help them. I volunteer here because I love it.

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You get state IDs taken care of, housing taken care of, so you can go to the library, buy books, TV. Just having the community and the kind of programs that are allowed to fill out an application without help. In the beginning, we were just doing fireside chats, but now we do that more regularly. We will probably not have that bed in Mary Hall. I probably would not have a job or a food for today.

Now that you have a home, what keeps you coming to Freedom House?

I love this place. I do not have to come here anymore, but I want to. They keep me occupied and away from danger away from being from being a problem in trouble with other people. That is why I continue to come. I also come because this is like my second home, my family. They are not going to let anything happen to me, and I am not going to do anything to help them. I volunteer here because I love it.

I am not a good reader, but I can spend a lot of time with a document and figure out what it means. Some people cannot read or write, and they are never going to be able to fill out an application without help. Without this place, I also come because this is like my second home, my family. They are not going to let anything happen to me, and I am not going to do anything to help them. I volunteer here because I love it.

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LESSONS, PG 4

ing demolished by bulldozers in pursuit of the city’s goal of “urban renewal.” The Community Reporter covered the story of neighbors who fought city hall to prevent the loss of the historic homes, some even going so far as to picket outside the home of the director of the city’s goal of “urban renewal.” The newspaper had a role in helping to raise awareness, change attitudes and maybe even help steer public policy in a positive direction. We thank you for your continued support and we look forward to serving you for the next 50!

Paul Bard is a lifelong St. Paulite. He has served on the board of the Community Reporter since 2017.

WHAT’S PAST IS PROLOGUE

The Community Reporter has seen many, many changes in its first 50 years. And we like to think that this little neighborhood newspaper had a role in helping to raise awareness, change attitudes and maybe even help steer public policy in a positive direction. We thank you for your continued support and we look forward to serving you for the next 50!

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• Donate to our fundraising campaign and help us grow the newspaper for the next 50 years at give mn.org/organizations/Community-Reporter or send a check to: The Community Reporter, 265 Oneida St., St. Paul, MN 55102.

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