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Seward community: a model for Minnesota's future

By: [Susan Schaefer](#)

Five years ago in July, my husband, Martijn Hermse, and I made Seward our home, largely due to the singular recruiting efforts of our dear friend, the former executive director of Seward Redesign, David Fey, who then was considered the unofficial "Mayor of Seward," and now in earnest is deputy mayor of Minneapolis.

David knew that this enclave of activism, this neighborhood of doers not talkers, would suit me. And right he was. Both Martijn and I became more than residents—we established home-based businesses and served the community as volunteers—Martijn on the board of directors of the Seward Co-op, and I for four years on Seward Neighborhood Group's (SNG) board.

Seward neighborhood exemplifies Community with a capital "C." Like the happy television adage for "Cheers," here everybody indeed "knows your name." After a dozen years of living in the impersonal suburbs, it was essential to my mental and spiritual health that I live, work and play with my neighbors. I was able to walk into Crown Video where proprietor Chris and her crew greeted us by name; or to dine at True Thai, where owner Chuck generously gifted us a "goodbye" takeout; or to call Welna Hardware and have Jim Welna, affable owner, personally come to change a screen on our side porch door!

Now I am embarking on one of the most significant transitions of my life. I am choosing to leave not just the neighborhood, but also the city, the state, and the country to seek a future in a foreign place—my husband's country, the Netherlands, where I've been accepted as the sole American in the European Union's master of public policy program at the University of Maastricht—analogue to Harvard's Kennedy School of Government cast in European terms for mid-career professionals. Upon graduating, I'd like to merge my communications expertise, business savvy and European policy proficiency, eventually working for a public or private sector organization where I can help emerging democracies with "preventive" development. I am interested in what author William Greider termed in a book title, "Opening Paths to a Moral Economy," leveraging the best of democracy and capitalism, while focusing on preserving human rights, leveling the playing field and eradicating prejudice. The education and practical experience will provide excellent foreign affairs expertise and prepare me to participate in global dynamics. My tenure in Seward has honed my appetite for such a leap to a world stage.

My Seward experience greatly mended an unfavorable taste I had for 11 of my past 16 years as a Minnesotan. Seward attracts a population more open to outside influences and diverse opinions than much of suburban and rural Minnesota. As a member of SNG's board, I both witnessed and influenced the neighborhood's policy toward racial, ethnic and philosophical inclusion. SNG, along with partner Seward Redesign, shepherd a socially conscious stewardship that fosters an enlightened form of economic development—welcoming, rather than shunning, the state's increasingly immigrant population. Franklin Avenue's economic health speaks to the success of involving members of diverse groups, planning with them for their incorporation into our cultural, social and economic fabric.

Elsewhere, it's a different story. Minneapolis remains extremely segregated, with one of the largest gaps nationally between those who have and have not. At a recent public policy committee breakfast meeting of the Minneapolis Regional Chamber of Commerce, where I served for the past six years, then acting Minneapolis School Superintendent, David Jennings, commented on the extreme poverty of a large portion of the city's residents. The city's own website concurs: "...the African American child poverty rate in Minneapolis is almost 50 percent, while the White child poverty rate is barely 10 percent." These are shocking statistics.

Minnesota Nice remains very much alive in spite of having been almost talked to death. The Land of 10,000 Lakes and 12-step programs still prefers polite secret keeping to outspoken criticism.

When Paul Wellstone died, I lost the sole role model of my culture—Jewish, East Coast moxie. My East Coast comrades may be brusque, but they are also genuine. So, it is with much pleasure that I read that the newly selected head of Minneapolis' schools charmed her audience with "New York straight talk," and that fellow former Philadelphian, police chief Bill McManus, has a communication style that guarantees a

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Susan Schaefer.

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more open dialogue for this area.

Friends and associates have asked if we will return to this part of the world. Surely our future is unknown, but the stunning geography, the caliber of the people, the potential for Minnesotans to embrace the inevitable future of diversity—all will beckon. And should I find a role for my new skills here, Seward will once more be my home.

"Tot seins"—that's "so long" in Dutch!

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