

COMMENTARY/NEWS

What does a good citizen look like? Tell us what you think

Another View

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Guest Columnist



For many, this is a crazy time of year. School years are racing to a finish — of particular impact here in Northfield — and unseasonably gorgeous weather has put ants in the pants of Minnesotans all over the state. As we re-emerge from the indoors to tend to our yards, walk the arb or just stroll the town, we see the faces of our neighbors who've also been in for the winter, of those returning from college in other parts of the world, of those visiting students taking classes here at our own fair colleges.

It's this season of reconnecting — with neighbors, friends and family — that reminds us what a unique sense of community Minnesotans have, especially in Northfield. We value the benefits that come from communities where citizens feel a responsibility to connect, to serve and to participate in the public issues that shape their daily lives. These sentiments and others came through with vibrant detail in a recent survey conducted by a group

of policy fellows at the University of Minnesota's Humphrey Institute for Public Affairs.

With the support of former policy fellows Betsy Buckheit and Dan Hoffmann, I had the opportunity to participate in this year's Humphrey Policy Fellowship. This program brings together emerging leaders from a variety of professional and personal backgrounds and political affiliations to provide practical training in public affairs leadership. We met a couple times each month to discuss different aspects of leadership with recognized leaders of all stripes.

The program included a trip to Washington, D.C. to visit with key people in almost every aspect of national policymaking. For a small-town citizen like me, this was a star-studded experience as we met with people I had only seen previously on TV — each shaping public policy in their own way. I lived in a policy geek's dream for three days at this epicenter of policy-making with fellow Minnesotans just as passionate about promoting the "common good" through good, collaborative policy as myself. We stayed up into the wee hours of the morning relating what we learned to Minnesota policy and discussing the need for focusing on common values to improve the political climate in our community. To reiterate, I went to "the District," plunged deep into the political abyss, and actually emerged optimistic, re-invigorated and eager to join the good fight.

This trip came at the beginning of another major

part of the Humphrey Fellowship: our small-group projects. Earlier in the program, we divided into several smaller groups of about five to eight fellows each, based on common issues of interest, to work on projects in those areas. Our group came together on the issue of civic engagement. After meeting with various stakeholders, we saw a need for a clearer definition of what it means to be a good citizen. We decided to put together a survey to explore the subject.

Over a two-month period, over 450 Minnesotans contributed their thoughts to our online survey that asked just three questions: What makes a good citizen? What would your community look like if more people did those things? And what can be done to encourage people to be good citizens?

Though unscientific, the results of this survey are telling. Hundreds of Minnesotans took the time to provide thoughtful, detailed answers to these purposefully broad, open-ended questions. Ideas about what makes a "good citizen" ran the gamut from simply "obeying laws and paying taxes" to describing a person who "shows up to help build the barn." Some people feel that most Minnesotans already do fulfill their vision of what a "good citizen" should be, while others wish that they and their neighbors had — or took advantage of — more opportunities for their voices to be heard. How would you answer these questions? What would Northfield look like if we thought more actively about our roles as individual citizens? Our

group invites you to visit a special website www.MINCitizensGather.com — where you can view the results of the survey and add your own unique thoughts to this important statewide discussion.

Better yet, when you're standing in the park with neighbors this summer or chatting it up with coworkers at the summer barbecue, ask them what they think makes a "good citizen" — just talking about what we value most in our communities is an easy first step toward making them better places to live and work.

This year's fellowship program comes to a close this week. But as we know, in this community of perpetual graduations, every ending is an opportunity to carry what we've begun into the next phase. The Humphrey fellowship exists with this in mind — specifically to prepare emerging leaders for the phases to come. I plan to take this to heart in using what I've learned to do my part in helping our community to continue to be the great place I call home.

Similarly, our Humphrey group hopes this glimpse into the nuances of Minnesota's civic character will inspire Minnesotans from all walks of life to think about how we can get more involved in the public issues that connect us to the communities in which we live and work.

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