

Personal Note from Nasra Noor

In 2007 there were very few Somali women who were willing to come out of their Seward Towers apartments and interact with the people in the broader Seward neighborhood, this new urban environment felt like a prison. They were afraid to trust anyone; there were language barriers and no activities for them to participate in. This was troubling to many people and this is the story of how two people, with the help of many others, did something about it.

The Seward Sewing Circle is a safe environment for all of the women and I want to tell you that they all look forward to sewing class days, sometimes they even come early and wait for me in front of the door to the class. This makes me happy. I love to see the success of this program and to share this story today. It motivates me to do more. I remind myself that in any situation you have to have patience. Sometimes the results take a longer time to reach the goal.

My goal was to get the elders out of their apartment and now I can say it took a couple of years, but they are really part of the greater Seward community. They have held open houses at the Towers, staffed a table at the King's Fair and at the Seward Art Crawl to sell things that they made in class. They also made quilts and donated them to new arrivals to the U.S. It is hard to remember now, but some of the ladies had never used a sewing machine before. Now the machines bring them joy and they share that with their neighborhood.

Origins of the Seward Sewing Circle in the Seward Towers

It began with a phone call. An unidentified woman from the Seward neighborhood was reaching out to the East African Women in the Seward Towers. She had heard that many Muslim women, especially those who wore the traditional head covering, were getting taunts, comments and angry looks and that some were afraid to go out of their homes.

This was in the first days following the terrorist attacks on 9/11 when emotions were high. The caller offered to walk with the women to help them feel more comfortable and wanted to know if there was anything else that she or the Seward community could do to help.

Shegitu Kebde, then Community Organizer for Common Bond in the Seward Towers, took the call and was touched by the woman's thoughtfulness. She responded by organizing a series of potluck lunches and invited the women in the Towers and the greater Seward community to come together to share their life experiences.

The women brought photos and through sign language and some help from interpreters shared their stories. They smiled a lot, shared their food, tried new dishes, and felt they were making friends. One Somali woman had spent her whole life on a small farm in Somalia. She was lonely for that life and delighted to share farm stories with women who had grown up on farms in Minnesota.

From Potlucks to Art Projects

From these lunches came the idea for a community-building art project called *Living in Seward Together* involving the women of Seward, both inside and outside of the towers. It was developed by a committee of the Seward Neighborhood Group (SNG) the Seward Community Arts Network (SCAN) and the Textile Center of Minnesota and funded with a grant from Metropolitan Regional Arts Council (MRAC). The goal was for the women to work together to create a story cloth quilt depicting the women's life stories.

The project was held in Seward Tower West, in the fall of 2004 in a 12-week series of workshops. Seward Tower and other Seward area women worked together to produce the beautiful Story Cloth Quilt that now hangs in the Seward Tower West Community Room.

A Minneapolis textile artist, Doroth Mayer, was hired to lead the project. Shegitu Kebede provided translation and organizing skills. Several Seward community women, such as Marilyn Matheny, Mary Laurel True, and others helped to conduct the workshops. A local photographer, Dawn Vogel, was contracted to photograph the workshops. The Textile Center loaned sewing supplies and the sewing machines.

First They Need to Learn to Sew

Tower residents who attended were of Somali, Eritrean, Ethiopian, and Swedish origins. Most of the East African women had never used a sewing machine before and needed to learn sewing techniques before they could build their quilt squares. They approached the sewing machines with trepidation; they were convinced that they could NOT do this.

However they were inspired to learn. In their cultures a woman who had a sewing machine earned great respect. So the women who could sew worked one-on-one with the women who could not, until they had conquered both their fears and the sewing machines. The thrill of mastery was huge and very satisfying for all the women.

The Workshop Left Them Wanting More

The workshop was fun for them all and the final product, the Story Quilt, was hung in a show at the Textile Center that all the women attended. The women were disappointed when they learned that the sewing machines were going away at the end of the project. Many pleaded for the project to continue and asked if they could have access to sewing machines as part of their Tower experience. It was hard to say no, but it was not possible, since the machines belonged to the Textile Center.

The Sunshine of Nasra

In 2005 the Seward Neighborhood Group made a decision to hire a staff person to help them build good relationships with the Tower residents. Nasra Noor, a young Somali woman, with a 3-year-old child, who was a resident of the Towers, was hired. It was her job to work with Tower residents, especially the women, to translate for them in Seward Towers programs, exercise classes, residents meetings, etc. She was to be a liaison between the residents in and the management of the Towers and the broader Seward community.

Viewed with the hindsight of 10 years (now in 2014), the decision to hire Nasra was both a stroke of luck and of genius. Her sunny personality, can-do attitude, and irrepressible energy led other women to try new things, trust new people, and resulted in enormous benefits for many in the greater Seward community. It also led to an answer to the sewing women's prayers.

Learning at The East Africa Women's Center

Nasra Noor and Marilyn Matheny met in 2005 while both were helping Doroth Mayer develop the East African Women Center (EAWC) within the Cedar Riverside complex. This center, supported by the Confederacy of Somali Community of Minnesota (CSCM) and the Brian Coyle Center was created to address the isolation of the East African women within the complex. The goal was to create a safe place centered on women's activities like sewing and weaving that would bring women out of their apartments to socialize.

Nasra was helping to recruit women for the center, knocking on people's doors, and using word of mouth and flyers within the Cedar Riverside area. Marilyn was on the center staff, teaching the women how to sew.

The center was successful and the women gradually came to see the center staff as good people that they could trust. They brought questions and personal problems to the center staff. Women who were previously distrustful brought bills and notices and even their bottles of prescriptions to the staff for help in translating the words and in understanding their meaning. Translators were always available and social workers were often called on to help the women

The sewing classes were always full and the women began to drop in for tea and to talk. They could relax and enjoy themselves, there was often singing, joking, laughing, and story telling while they sewed.

Why Not a Sewing Program in the Seward Towers?

In February 2007, after working at EAWC for about 2 years, Nasra and Marilyn asked themselves: "Why can't we create something like this for the women in the Seward neighborhood?" They knew that the women in the Seward Towers were asking for a sewing program. They knew there were five things needed for a basic sewing program: a teacher, a translator, sewing machines, classroom space, and sewing supplies. Between them they already had the first two.

They then approached Shegitu Kebde. She was living in the Franklin Apartments on Franklin and had attempted to start a sewing program for the women there. She had a closet full of donated fabric, 2 sewing machines, and miscellaneous supplies. She was happy to turn over her sewing materials to someone who would start a sewing project for the women. So they now had three (four?) of the basics.

They next approached the Seward Neighborhood Group (SNG) to ask for their support. It was serendipity that SNG had just received a bequest of \$1,000 from the estate of Seward

resident, Ione Bervin, with a suggestion from the donor's family that it might be used in a sewing project since Ione was an avid sewer.

This money was used to negotiate the purchase of four brand new Pfaff sewing machines. The SNG staff also wrote and submitted a grant application to Metropolitan Regional Arts Council (MRAC) for funds to hire Marilyn as the sewing teacher and to provide supplies for the sewing project.

The only thing needed was space to hold the classes. So SNG and Common Bond reached an agreement that provided regular access to classrooms and storage rooms in both of the Seward Towers, at no charge. All five things were in place.

The Seward Sewing Circle Begins

Though the grant would not come through for a few months they were anxious to begin the classes. So in June, they set up the classroom space, organized the supplies, and made prototypes of projects for the first classes. Marilyn trained Nasra and two volunteers in using the machines. On July 11, 2007, they held the first class of the Seward Sewing Circle at Seward Tower West with six students attending. The next day they had 15 students in the first class at Seward Tower East. Word about the classes spread quickly through the Tower community and in the next few weeks they were nearly overwhelmed by the response. (*Get number of attendees?*)

The first focus was for the students to learn to use the sewing machines. As in the quilt workshops many of the women were apprehensive. Nasra, who was also new at sewing, was able to encourage the women by demonstrating her own mastery of the machines. This wasn't an easy role for her, since in Somali culture young people do not tell elders what to do! But still, she and Marilyn repeatedly told them "Yes, you can, you can do it" and gradually the women were feeling capable and competent.

Beginning with simple projects like potholders and pincushions that they could complete in one class, the students advanced to making tote bags, which were very popular. They tried making aprons, but the women didn't wear them and therefore they were not very successful.

By September the women were confident in their sewing skills and were bringing in their own projects, fabrics, and clothes to mend. Marilyn taught them how to making their own traditional dresses (*dirac*) and from then on they become more and more independent. Access to the sewing machines was saving them a lot of money on their clothing. Some of the women developed their sewing skills into a livelihood. They purchased a sewing machine and began do sewing in their homes for others.

The Seward Sewing Circle Continues

Seven years later (2014), the class continues and has evolved into an independent open sewing experience where the women do not need much oversight or instructions. The program has been successful in providing regular access to sewing machines for the Seward Tower residents. In addition it has encouraged them to interact with volunteers and visitors from outside of the Towers and to socialize with others over sweet tea and Sambosas. (*Sp?*)

The class functions on very limited money but a lot of good will and warm hearts from Seward neighborhood volunteers and the Common Bond staff. Two people who exemplify this are Karen Franzmeier and Diann Anders, both volunteered weekly for several years. They are committed supporters of the SSC.