



Finding inspiration – and diversity – in Pelican Rapids



Pelican Rapids, Minn.

Jessica Henry is at heart a Minnesota girl, even though she teaches at Hastings College in Nebraska. She was born in Moorhead, graduated from what was then called Moorhead State University and spends time each summer at her father's place on Franklin Lake near this small lakes country city.

It's only proper, then, that a major project Henry spearheaded for about 50 students at Hastings this school year had its roots and inspiration in Minnesota.

Henry, other professors, students and important Hastings institutions collaborated on "Faces of Hastings," an exhibit and book chronicling — and celebrating — the growing diversity in the south-central Nebraska city of 25,000. The book is available for purchase online. The exhibit is on display at the Hastings Museum through early June.

The professor of communication studies admits the inspiration for the project came from Minnesota. Pelican Rapids, to be exact.

"I basically stole the idea," Henry said, laughing. "Actually, I called the people in Pelican and said, 'Do you mind if I copy this idea? It's wonderful and

I want to do it down here in Hastings.' They said that was fine and were very encouraging."

"Faces of Change"

is a project started in 2003 by former Pelican Rapids library director Joan Ellison. Wanting to document the growing changes sparked by immigrants and refugees moving to the town of 2,500 — mostly to work for the large West Central Turkeys processing plant — Ellison interviewed and photographed 25 residents of varying nationalities, backgrounds, religions and languages.

She included an elderly resident who emigrated from Germany to Minnesota in 1912, some of the people responsible for bringing immigrants to Pelican Rapids and, of course, some of the new faces themselves. The influx of immigrants to Pelican Rapids began with Mexican workers bused from south Texas to work seasonal jobs at the turkey plant and has continued through the more recent immigration of Somalians.

In 2006, according to "Faces of Change," West Central Turkeys employed people speaking nine languages: English, Spanish, Vietnamese, Serbo-Croatian, Somali, Kurdish, Russian, Cambodian and Arabic.

Ellison's exhibit was made up of 27 pieces, each including photographs and text telling the subjects' stories. They are at once inspirational, maddening, heartbreaking and wildly informative. The stories

are not sanitized and tell of some issues that have locals suspicious of the newcomers. Racism is addressed.

The exhibit was most recently on display at the Otter Tail County Historical Society in Fergus Falls. It spent two years on rotation in the Hennepin County Library System in the Twin Cities.

"It's a project that's still relevant today, some 15 years later. It's really cool," said Annie Wrigg, the current director at the beautiful Pelican Rapids library that overlooks the Pelican River downtown. "And a good number of the people in it are still around here."

Ellison turned the exhibit into a book in 2007, and that's where Henry enters the picture. While visiting her dad about 10 years ago, Henry saw a copy of "Faces of Change" at a downtown bookstore. She bought it and read it. The light went off.

"We were seeing some of the same things in Hastings. We have meat-packing plants around here and there were people coming to town who looked different and spoke different than the majority of people in Nebraska," Henry said. "But I think we have a tendency to compartmentalize those differences and not really try to notice them or spend much time thinking about them. Yet those kids are sitting next to your kids in school. Their parents are working and shopping in the same town you are. They are living in the community."

Henry got around to doing the project this year, first contacting Ellison and asking for her blessing to move forward. Once that was secured, Henry decided to expand the interviews to include a wider range of differences than just nationality or ethnicity. She wanted to highlight diversity in socio-economic backgrounds, sexual preferences, religions. She even directed a student to interview a farmer who lived outside of town to pinpoint the difference of living in a rural area as opposed to the city.

"I just wanted the kids to talk to all kinds of different people," Henry said. "For the students, I wanted them to understand there is a whole lot of diversity out there — even in our community. We're not as small as Pelican Rapids, but we're still a pretty small city, yet there are all kinds of diverse people here. At the same time, they are people just like you.

"I told the kids that in some cases we interact with people and we might not even know about their diversity," she added. "When it comes to religion, somebody might look exactly like you and speak exactly like you, but their religious beliefs might be very different than yours. I call that hidden diversity. You don't see it; you can't see it, but it's there."

Like Ellison did in Pelican Rapids, Henry collaborated with some important entities in Hastings, including the local YWCA, the

Adams County Historical Society and the Hastings Community Foundation.

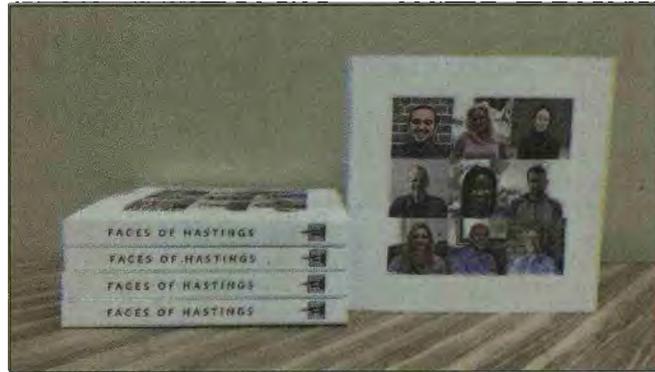
Local buy-in is important in projects like this, she said.

"I think this is a project that should be done in every community," Henry said. "Given the debates we're having in this country right now about immigration and multiculturalism, we should be doing more

projects like this and learning more about our communities and the people who live in them.'

In other words, more towns should be inspired by the work done in Pelican Rapids. Residents might learn more about their communities, their neighbors and perhaps themselves.

What a novel idea.



Danielle Shenk / Hastings College

Copies of "Faces of Hastings" sit on display at the Hastings. (Neb.) Museum. The book was inspired by a similar one published in 2007 about the diversity changes in Pelican Rapids, Minn.



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Residents of Hastings, Neb., view the "Faces of Hastings" exhibit. Inspired by a similar project done about 15 years ago in Pelican Rapids, Minn., "Faces of Hastings" explores and celebrates diversity in a community.