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## Christians Want Power? Sioux Center Pushes Back on New York Times Story

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# Christians Want Power? Sioux Center Pushes Back On New York Times Story



An aerial view of Dordt University in Sioux Center, Iowa. Photo courtesy of Dordt University.

SIOUX CENTER, Iowa (OPINION) — When I moved to Sioux Center from Washington, D.C., five years ago to teach journalism at Dordt University, I emailed the school's HR department to get contacts for moving companies who could unload our van.

You don't need that around here, I was told. "I will put out an email at some point and see how many people will be around."

OK, I replied. But I was a little skeptical. I shouldn't have been.

On move-in day more than a dozen strangers showed up to help me lug couches, beds and boxes and boxes of books. I still owe some of them a thank-you cookout.

That first week we had new neighbors mow our lawn, cut down a dead tree branch and spray the yard for bugs. After all, we former city renters were short in the yard equipment department. I even had the owner of a local furniture store stay open well past his normal closing time when we arrived minutes before he usually locked the doors.

That's the kind of community Sioux Center is. I see service in action a lot more than I hear any preaching about the gaining and maintaining of power. But that is not quite the Sioux Center depicted in a recent *New York Times* article.

I understand. I know how hard it is to parachute into a place and come away with a complete picture of that community. During my decade as a political reporter based in the nation's capital, I once rented a car and drove across the country, from Washington, D.C., to Washington state, in advance of the 2010 midterm elections. I know it is tempting to go to a place and just report in a way that confirms your pre-existing stereotypes. That makes you feel smart. That you were dead-on with your insights. It's much harder to be open to having your stereotypes challenged by your street-level reporting and not just seek out (or keep in your final piece) people who match your original thoughts on what a place is like.

After reading this article on my adopted town, I think the piece will satisfy East Coast readers who have a handful of stereotypes that pop into their minds on those rare times they think about flyover country. They likely nodded their heads in satisfaction that this article confirmed these preconceived notions, and then they turned the page.

I've done more than parachute into Sioux Center. I call it my home. And you can find a broad diversity here. So much so that any slice you choose does not feel like the whole. So here are a few additional facts about this community that did not fit into the recent *Times* piece:

Our church small group is more diverse than my small groups in Washington, D.C. We enjoy the company of three people from Mexico, a gentleman from Paraguay, a woman from Japan, an engineering professor from Ghana and a couple originally from that exotic place called South Carolina (that's me). In fact, out of our 12-member small group, only two originally hail from Northwest Iowa. Meanwhile my D.C. small groups featured all upper middle-class White people mostly sporting advanced degrees and flashy jobs inside the Beltway. But the stereotype would reverse that. My Sioux Center small group should be all White and my D.C. one would surely be full of diversity, right? Wrong. A small university brings variety to even a small town. Dordt University here houses faculty from places like Germany, Australia, China, Korea and Canada.

One more thing: I see a lot of integration here between the majority with Dutch roots and the ongoing influx of Hispanics, another counternarrative to the suspected storyline of deep separation. In fact, my family attended a birthday party this past weekend for a Hispanic girl turning 4. It featured not one but two piñatas, an inflatable waterslide and a nice mix of Whites and Hispanics. The food and fellowship put my own birthday (held on the same day) to shame. I see a lot of that mixing of backgrounds here in Sioux Center. Could there be more? Sure. But the effort is being made. There are ethnic bridgebuilders on both sides trying to help this community integrate.



A recent annual “adoption Sunday” event in Sioux Center celebrated families who have chosen to adopt children. Photo courtesy of Dordt University.

But of course when is anybody 100 percent satisfied when a story gets written about where he or she lives? The *Times* snapshot provided one picture of Sioux Center, but not a complete one. Capturing nuance in explanatory journalism is hard. People are complex. Places are complex. That’s why I wanted to offer up a bit of my picture of Sioux Center.

That is not to say that the *Times* picture is wrong. It represents a slice of life here and fits a certain narrative that exists. Yet that slice does not represent the entire pie that makes up Sioux Center. I know that it is hard to capture the mystery and complexity of any place in one article. But Sioux Center is not a monolith. Other voices and perspectives exist. Including even one of those voices offering a counternarrative to the caricature makes the picture depicted in any story that much more complete. Does journalism exist to confirm stereotypes, often shaped by readers from afar, or to sometimes have those challenged? I do think it is interesting that the *Times* article depicted a nuclear family who goes to church and prays before sharing a meal as something curious to study like Jane Goodall going to live with the apes. When did that become an outlier and not a cornerstone of America?

I am glad the piece mentioned the Iowa caucuses from 2016. I remember that evening well. It was my first caucus. People crammed into the room, glad to be out of the February cold. Everyone chatted with their seatmates about how their year had gone



so far. An easy familiarity warmed this small talk. Then organizers called the meeting to order. The proceedings began with two things you don't normally see occur at a polling place: a prayer and the Pledge of Allegiance. The surrogates for each candidate took the stage for a little stump speech. Paper ballots got passed out and then counted by hand while more informal chatting continued. Finally, officials shouted out the results. And like the *Times* piece stated, Trump finished fourth in Sioux County with just 11 percent of the vote.

His comment during his local appearance about being so popular he could shoot someone in the middle of Fifth Avenue and not lose voters likely lost him some voters here. Then people said goodnight and wandered back into the dark winter. About an hour had passed. To me, fresh from the East Coast and used to voting behind a curtain in a matter of minutes, it felt sort of like an episode of *Little House on the Prairie* except with cars waiting for us outside instead of wagons.

Just this past January I checked out the city's Democratic caucus. More than 120 city residents packed the meeting room above the city's indoor (thankfully with our winters) pool and eventually sprinkled their delegates around a half a dozen candidates from Amy Klobuchar to Elizabeth Warren. They voted by physically clustering around each candidate's surrogate like human ballots. Today some Black Lives Matter banners flutter outside Sioux Center houses near neighbors who've hoisted Trump flags.

That is my Sioux Center. I could go on. Talk about things like how I leave my door unlocked and a blank check on the kitchen counter for repair workers- something that would have bankrupted me in D.C. Or describe the annual adoption Sunday where so many people come down to the front to celebrate being a family of adoption that I feel my wife and I are the only ones still sitting in the pews. But the point is that you can select one line of a sermon or a hymn or a prayer to fit any sort of narrative. Such as people being obsessed with maintaining and gaining power. But stripped of context and nuance, that set narrative can be so narrow it ends up being misleading.

I'm not trying to say Sioux Center is perfect. Far from it. I wish there were more restaurants and less sub-zero days. But after settling here for far longer than a couple of reporting visits I can say that community service and engagement trumps the pursuit of power. And it is not even close. Simply put, there is not a type of Sioux Center resident who any reporter can carbon copy as representative of the entire city. I suspect that is the case for every town in this country despite the broad brushstrokes usually painted by the media.

When I first announced that my family planned to move here many of my D.C. friends exclaimed, "You are moving where?!?"

I invited everyone to come for a visit. That's the best way for East Coast dwellers to understand how folks in the Midwest are the way they are. A few of those friends have joined me here for bike rides in the cornfields. And all of them have left—

returning to the stress and traffic and expense (and admittedly the better restaurants) of city life— basically saying the same thing, “I can see why you moved here.”