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Diversity still defines life, work in Postville

By **KAREN BUSHANAM**

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POSTVILLE — Postville is still a melting pot.

Five years after what was then the biggest immigration raid in U.S. history, people still come from afar in search of a good job and a good life. They are still drawn by jobs at the meatpacking plant — now under new ownership as Agri Star Meat & Poultry LLC.

Workers still bring families and settle down. But the raid on May 12, 2008 — when ICE agents detained 389 undocumented workers at the now-defunct Agriprocessors plant — did leave a mark.

“Prior to the raid there was more a sense of community pride. It was kind of like this American story, this taste of Postville. Look at all these dif-

ferent cultures, this kind of American Midwest pride. We all sort of get along more or less. Where as now it seems a lot more disjointed,” said the Rev. Greg Bahl of St. Bridget’s Catholic Church.

But the diversity is still evident in the schools, where children from 18 different lands form a kind of United Nations of education and the district’s phone directory offers instructions in English, Spanish and Somali.

When students enroll in Cora B. Darling Elementary and Middle School, Principal Chad Wahls tries to soothe first-day nerves.

Regardless of whether the child speaks Spanish, hails from Somalia or Israel or is a native Iowan, the assurances are the same.

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Photos by MATTHEW PUTNEY / Courier Photo Editor

Ron Wahls, right, a school guidance counselor, gives student Najma Jama a high five April 30 at the Cora B. Darling Elementary and Middle School in Postville. Eighteen flags are on display at the school, one for each nationality represented in the student body.



Jonathon Lopez works on a tablet computer in a class at Darling Elementary School.



Mary Guese, right, checks over Ugbad Abdi's work.

DIVERSITY

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“We don’t know where they went,” McCauley said. Some likely returned to their home countries. Some secured visas and settled legally with their families in the United States. “Some of them are back in Postville, and some of them are working in Agri Star,” McCauley said. “I do know that some of them found it too difficult to set their foot in that building.”

New beginnings

Memories of the raid surely linger for affected students, Wahls said, but aren’t readily visible. “I think their families have recovered from it like any other tragic event,” Wahls said. “In order to grow ... you have to move on.”

Students rotate in and out of the district as their parents move on to other cities and other jobs, which makes tracking demographics difficult. “It’s hard to gauge because we have such a transient population,” Wahls said. He can say Postville is officially a majority-minority school district. More than two dozen Somali students are enrolled in Postville. Children from Mexico and Central American countries like El Salvador

and Guatemala make up at least 45 percent of the student body. Overall, the district saw an enrollment boost. Prior to the raid 380 students were enrolled in the K-8 building. Now the school counts more than 420 elementary and middle school students, in part due to an unprecedented large kindergarten class of 76 students — almost double the norm. Enrollment at the high school stayed steady at around 145. Diversity is increasingly present on the religious front, Bahl said. In addition to the established Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox Jewish communities, newer arrivals include Somali Muslims, Eastern and Orthodox Christians and Hispanic evangelicals. The challenges of assimilation and the convergence of cultures, while present, aren’t the most pressing concerns for Wahls. “The bigger challenge in my mind isn’t diversity, it’s poverty,” Wahls said. “You can take children of different language origins and teach them English, and they can create friendships where they continue to practice that. I don’t know if you can take kids out of poverty.” Bahl and McCauley helped plan a commemoration of the fifth anniversary of the Postville raid that was held Friday in Cedar Rapids. The event

was meant to remind Iowans of the workers arrested during the raid and build support for the reform of immigration policies. “My hope is the Postville story will have the power to not only transform hearts but to play a part in the critical transformation of our immigration laws,” McCauley said. “We can really celebrate and reconcile that the tragedy that happened at Postville can be turned into a victory of justice,” Bahl said.

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