Diversity still defines life, work in Postville

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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 different 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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A tenable thing

A sign in the front window of Darling Elementary School on Postville welcomes people in 23

DIVERSITY

 classroom atmosphere is for its striking diversity. The school community with just 2,200

years before the infamous immigration raid, Postville

diversity that is commonplace in

injured and worked at St. Bridget’s at the time of the raid. She clearly remembers the hundreds of Latino families who sought shelter at St. Bridget’s.

families that were dumped by the raid. For several years after, St. Bridget’s

able to pay rent, bills or

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in Postville, that

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People used to say it was

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ill today.

And then we had the immigration raid. The woman who shared the news

the town differently. Despite

Wisconsin. He means what he says.

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abandoned economy, dealt a

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Hopeful residents see their

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linger for affected students, that building!' 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.

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"We don't know what they went," McCauley said. "Some likely returned to their home countries. Some sought 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 Stats," McCauley said. "It do know that some of them found it too difficult to stay here but to stay in that building." New beginnings: Memories of the raid are hard 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 let go." Students rotate in and out of the district as their parents move on to other cities of the district as their parents move on to other cities. Wahls said, which makes tracking demographics difficult. "It's hard to gauge because we have such a transient population," Wahls said. "We can say Postville is a majority-minority school district."

More than two dozen formal students are enrolled in Postville. Children from Hispanic and Central American countries like El Salvador and Guatemala make up at least 41 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 70 students - almost double the norm. Enrollment at the high school stayed steady at around 145. Diversity is increasingly present on the religious front, Wahls said. "We don't know where they are," McCauley said. "We can really celebrate and reconcile that the tragedy that happened at Postville can be turned into a victory of justice," Wahls said.

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