

## Through good times and bad, Nathaniel Khaliq loyal to his St. Paul neighborhood



MinnPost photo by Doug Grow Nathaniel Khaliq has seen both progress and setbacks in his beloved Selby-Dale neighborhood.

So many battles won, so many lost and so many — well, sometimes battles don't end the way they begin.

Nathaniel A. Khaliq, still known by most of his friends in St. Paul's neighborhoods as Nick Davis, laughed about one of those battles that he and his dear friend and fellow civil rights warrior, the late Katie McWatt, fought a few years back.

The Mississippi Market Food Co-op wanted to move its store into the Selby-Dale area of the city, and Khaliq and McWatt were up in arms.



"We were saying, 'We don't want any more of these yuppie things in the neighborhood,' " Khaliq recalled. "No way that store. Hell, no."

### A surprise end to a battle

They fought the good fight — and they lost. The store opened about 15 months ago.

Weeks passed. Khaliq honored his vow not to set foot in the store. He presumed McWatt, too, was staying out.

"One day I was walking past the store," Khaliq recalled.

He looked around and didn't see anybody he knew.

"I thought, 'I'll just sneak in for a second and see what they got.' "

He slipped into the store.

"I looked around a little," Khaliq said. "I was thinking, 'Ooh, this looks pretty good.' "

He looked around a little more —and ran into McWatt.

"What are *you* doing here?" he asked McWatt.

"What are *you* doing here?" McWatt asked Khaliq.

Both started laughing.

McWatt, who died in April, became a regular at the store. Khaliq, who became a regular, is now a member of the store's board of directors.

"They've hired more people of color than anyone on Selby or Grand," he said. "They actually back up their talk."

So much has changed in the neighborhood where Khaliq was born 67 years ago and has fought so hard to save from punks, rogue cops, "red-liners" and developers who would have gentrified the entire community.

Another of those changes is coming in November, when Khaliq will step down as president of the St. Paul chapter of the NAACP.

#### **Low-key success stories**

Unlike the Minneapolis chapter, which for years has been embroiled in vicious internal struggles, the Khaliq-led St. Paul chapter has quietly gone about its business. Its most recent battles have surrounded the gang lists, one kept by the state's Bureau of Criminal Apprehension and the far-larger one maintained by the Ramsey County Sheriff's Office. The existence of those lists came out as part of the unraveling of the corrupt Gang Task Force.

Investigations showed that there were high levels of inaccuracies on the lists. Additionally, criteria for being placed on the list were highly subjective.

The NAACP went to work. There were meetings with Ramsey County Sheriff Bob Fletcher, who finally agreed to remove some of the names from his list.

"How can you put a 14-year-old on the list without notifying his parents?" Khaliq asked Fletcher. "At the same time, you want to hold the parents accountable."

There were meetings with the state Legislature, which led to headaches and finally a study group.

The state Legislature long has baffled Khaliq. Often dominated by DFLers, Khaliq said the body seems to seldom represent DFL principles, especially as those principles might make life better for people of color in

the inner cities.

"At the Legislature you have so many of those people who see everything black and white," Khaliq said. "It's either 'you're for us or against us. You're either for cracking down on crime or you're against it.' "

The issue, gangs and crime, is far more nuanced in the inner city than that.

No one has worked harder on cracking down on crime in his neighborhood.

No one has worked harder to try to create fairness in the justice system, which often seems so loaded against people of color.

That problem remains unresolved, though Khaliq gives high marks to St. Paul Mayor Chris Coleman and former City Attorney John Choi for both understanding the two-edged problem and trying to resolve it.

#### **Time for new ideas, young blood**

Certainly, the work Davis has done has mattered. The neighborhoods around Selby-Dale are so much safer, so much improved over what they were at the height of drug wars in the 1980s.

"But it's time for new ideas, young blood," said Khaliq of stepping down. "I want to have more time with all those grandchildren [13] I've got who are growing up so fast."

He is leaving at a historic time for St. Paul. For the first time in the city's history, it's on the verge of sending an African-American to the state Legislature. And it looks there will be two: Former Police Chief John Harrington is expected to win the East Side Senate seat held by Mee Moua, who is stepping down, and Rena Moran is expected to succeed Rep. Cy Thao, who also is stepping down.

Khaliq views these changes with mixed emotions. He doesn't have great faith in Harrington's commitment to inner-city issues.

"He was a Republican until the day he filed to run for the Senate," Khaliq said. "I saw it [the news of his announcement] in the paper, and I was amazed. John Harrington, a DFLer!"

Besides, Moua was a powerful ally.

"Whenever we had issues, we went to her," he said, "and she understood."

Though he didn't support Moran in the primary, he does have high hopes for her and is certain she'll be stronger than Thao.

The intriguing question surrounding Harrington and Moran is why St. Paul never has had black representation in the Legislature.

#### **Testy labor relations**

The only thing Khaliq can put his finger on is the power of labor in the DFL. He believes "the good old boys" in labor have "pulled the plug" on substantial numbers of rising political figures in the city over the years.

He and McWatt went many rounds with labor over the years regarding hiring practices. One incident stands out.

Back in the 1980s, there was a community meeting with a carpenters' union official. The issue: hiring more apprentice workers from the inner city.

It didn't go well.

"The guy says to me, 'We're not just going to hire some kid off Dale and Selby,'" Khaliq recalled. "I said to him, 'You don't have a problem hiring farm kids who can barely read. It seems to me your hiring practice are racist.' "

The labor official didn't react well.

"He slammed his briefcase shut, started walking out of the room and said, 'I'm not going to take that, you black bastard.' "

Khaliq, who does not know who his father was, was furious.

"We locked horns," Khaliq recalled. "We tore up that room pretty good."

The labor official left the room and headed to the police station, filing assault charges against Khaliq. When Khaliq learned the police were coming to arrest him, he filed assault charges against the labor official. (Both had bruises to prove their points.)

"It was a wash," he said.

But the incident underscores a problem that has not gone away. The relationship between some of the trades unions and African-Americans remains shaky. That also means, Khaliq said, that the trust people of color have in the DFL isn't strong, either.

"Years of disappointment," said Khaliq.

In this year's election, that could spell trouble for DFL gubernatorial candidate Mark Dayton. He needs large inner-city turnouts. Khaliq sees little interest in the governor's race.

"A lot of people don't think it makes any difference," Khaliq said.

He doesn't necessarily buy that indifference, but it exists. Khaliq said Dayton has the right overall message — education, jobs, health care — but unless "he gets more specific, unless he comes and talks directly to people about specific things he has in mind," he doesn't see a high turnout.

The retired St. Paul firefighter seems to know everyone — of all races — in the community he's done so much to save.

Last week, he sat in a coffee shop on a corner that once was controlled by thugs, trying to eat a waffle. But each person who entered the café, headed to Khaliq. He'd stand, there'd be a hug, a conversation, some laughs and another hug. The waffle grew cold. The hugs just kept on coming.

"Long time ago, we had a really tough spell," said Khaliq of the

neighborhood he loves. "Joe Soucheray [a Pioneer Press columnist] wrote that Hague Avenue was the worst street in America to live on. I invited him to come out and walk through the neighborhood with me. I don't know how many times I asked him to come. He never would. ... Look around. It's a great place."

There's a Katie McWatt Avenue. There's a minority-owned coffee shop. There are affordable homes. Even a nice food co-op.

You could call it Mr. Khaliq's Neighborhood.

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