

# Chapman: Strength to overcome silence

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Role models continue to pop up around Pierce County as I meet more readers each week. Last Sunday, I met a few more as I was touched by the warmth and support offered to visiting author Melanie Hoffert.

Hoffert was a guest of Prairie Talks, a series by Village Arts, and spoke about her book "Prairie Silence," in front of a crowd of about 25 at Rugby Eagles Club.

The courage shown by Hoffert in just writing a memoir about growing up gay in North Dakota is remarkable itself. But for her to speak in front of complete strangers takes a special type of bravery. The award-winning author and Wyndmere native acknowledged that she still struggles with speaking about who she is in her very conservative home state.

Hoffert's appearance in a city she never previously visited served as a reminder to not shy away from the unknown.

While some readers may be uncomfortable with her reality, it was comforting to see some familiar and new faces listen to her speak with genuine curiosity. I feel I shouldn't have to say it in 2014, but I'm proud to count Hoffert and her supporters as friends.

Prairie Talks organizer and Esmond native Kristi Rendahl expected some flak for inviting her former classmate at Concordia College. Heart of America Library director Sheila Craun foresaw some disapproval when she co-sponsored the event. Some attendees clearly didn't know what to expect, but left reassured of the human spirit's ability to challenge convention by listening to someone different.

Personally, I was struck by Hoffert's confidence as a writer and a person. The beautiful prose throughout the book matched her shining personality and glowing smile. She struck a perfect balance of sharing her life stories, writing process and concerns for the difficulties facing gay youth. The latter really touched home.

I know how important it is for allies to be present. My best friend, Whitten, who I've previously written about in this column, was gay. I'll never know how much bullying and derision played a part in his decision to take his own life, but I witnessed the harsh language and the abandonment that followed his coming out.

It is so easy for people to forget how much of an impact their words and judgment can have on an individual and his or her family and friends.

I'd do just about anything to have my friend back, and to remind him how much people did care. As I read Hoffert's book, I craved the opportunity to jump on my Google messenger and let my buddy know that other people knew his struggle well, that there's always hope.

I thought of him and his parents and fought the anger and sadness that momentarily enveloped me when a reader called last week with some ugly language because the Tribune ran an article in advance of the Prairie Talks event.

I don't expect everyone to agree with me, but I know how warm this community can be and hope everyone knows that the support is there for anyone who needs it. And that also means support for those who fear differences and things they don't understand. The fact is we don't always need to understand or make sense of things. Sometimes it's better to just value human life and support one another.

The silence that Hoffert writes about is a part of everyone's life whether it's about their identity or something else. You're not alone.

For starters, consider the Tribune a place where anyone can feel comfortable.

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