

Wyndmere native to discuss her 'Prairie Silence'

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Melanie Hoffert didn't set out to write a book when she returned to her hometown of Wyndmere for the 2010 harvest. Hoffert, a managing director at Teach for America in Minneapolis, was seeking to reconnect with her roots and face the silence that surrounded a reluctance to share her life with family and friends in smalltown North Dakota.

Hoffert is gay, and coming out in the rural Midwest didn't come as smoothly as her ability to craft an incredibly descriptive and heartfelt memoir.

The 39-year-old will discuss her book "Prairie Silence: A rural expatriate's journey to reconcile home, love and faith" at 2 p.m. on Jan. 26 at the Rugby Eagles Club. The event is co-sponsored by Prairie Talks and Heart of America Library with support from the North Dakota Humanities Council.

Article Photos



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"I'm really, really looking forward to Rugby because I really want to talk to the people who are part of the place I'm talking about," Hoffert said. "I'm also a little bit scared, to be honest, just because everything in the book

about placement, fear and judgement still comes up for me."

Hoffert has done readings in New York City, Chicago and San Francisco. She's also made stops in Fargo, Bismarck and did her first North Dakota readings in Wahpeton - a half hour from Wyndmere.

"I was scared," Hoffert said. "What's gonna happen. Are people gonna show up mad? Both nights it was a packed house with people I know - friends, classmates and family.

"The other reaction I'd say that's been really interesting is while people don't necessarily identify with my particular story, I've had many people reach out about silence in their lives and with their families."

Whether or not readers can relate to being gay, love of the prairie and examination of silence have resonated as strong themes, Hoffert said.

She writes: "Prairie Silence is - I have come to believe - the way the people of the prairie mirror the land with their sturdy, hardworking, fruitful, and quiet dispositions. They swallow their problems, their fears, their shames, and their secrets - figuring that nature will take care of everything, somehow or other. That is, after all, how it works with the crops. And once silence has taken hold, whatever it is, it is hard to uproot."

The memoir weaves experiences of her youth, college years and adult life with the month she took off from her busy schedule in the Twin Cities to help her father with the harvest and travel through many small towns.

Hoffert captures the beauty of the prairie with countless descriptions of the land. While back home for the harvest her brother Donny coaxed her into climbing 75 feet up a grain leg to help oil some bearings.

"I see for miles and the opening washes over me, into me," she writes. "From here the farm is one holistic entity. And the colors of the earth are those of harvest: gold crops, black earth, white grasses, yellow roads, all contrasted by the blue sky. This freedom is what I've been craving."

The book also details her relationship with God, her family's support and reaction to her coming out. Her grandma offered support, saying, "You know, Grandpa and I don't care. It doesn't matter to us. We accept you no matter what."

Hoffert writes: "My grandparents remind me that the human spirit does have the ability to discern and navigate and love, despite the powerful conditioning of doctrine and politics and institution. It is up to all of us to choose."

Writing the memoir helped Hoffert make sense of her past and present and proved cathartic and healing, she said.

Prairie Talks organizer Kristi Rendahl went to Concordia College in Moorhead, Minn., and was eager to get the first-time North Dakota author on the schedule.

"When I got done reading - and I read it in one sitting on a flight - I thought it was about the silence that surrounds anything that's different," Rendahl said. "We underestimate the acceptance and love of the families and communities in our lives."

Hoffert will sign books and hopes to connect with anyone interested in discussing her story.

"Looking back, it's crazy that years and years went by where I didn't share my life," Hoffert said. "I definitely hope and know that it has started conversations. I've had people give the book to their parents as a way to open conversations about their lives."