

'We are All Criminals' could mean you

Project sheds light on people's attitudes

Written by Jill Callison; Reprinted with permission from the Sioux Falls Argus Leader

Emily Baxter asks people to share past crimes that, had they been caught in the act, could have kept them from their chosen professions, out of desirable housing or destroyed their self-worth.

When I first heard about "We are All Criminals," my first thought, without hesitation, was "I would have nothing to contribute."

Then I thought about it longer. And, yes, like Baxter who says, "I've sampled the buffet" when asked about incidents in her past, I have things I could confess.

I'm willing to bet that you do, too.

I'm not telling you mine, and you don't have to tell me yours. But if you like, you can tell them to Baxter, who continues to expand the project that has consumed two years.

For Baxter, a 1997 graduate of Lincoln High School, the idea behind "We are All Criminals" came through her employment as a lawyer with the Council on Crime and Justice in the Twin Cities and previous work as a public defender.

One in four people, nationally and in Minnesota, has a criminal record, Baxter says. That's the population she works with. That 25 percent are the ones who can't find housing or employment or have their professional license reinstated. She would advocate for those people, speaking to landlords, legislators and licensing boards about giving people second chances.

Often, it felt like repeatedly ramming her head against a brick wall.

One day, a prospective employer said about a potential hire, "Once a thief, always a thief."

Baxter's reaction? "You're telling me you've never stolen anything that wasn't yours?"

The employer backed off but justified past sins by saying, sure, he might have taken items of petty value, or was young and stupid and in college or was drunk.

"He had all these justifications, says Baxter, whose parents, Pat and Marty Baxter, still live in Sioux Falls. "He was allowing for that in his own story, but he wouldn't give the same nuances to people applying for positions at his own company."

She thought about all the other people — business owners, doctors, students, recent graduates — whose life would have been derailed by a single offense. The unfairness of the future confronting those who were caught dismayed her.

"I'm not making light of the crimes that have been committed," 35-year-old Baxter says. "But the punishment has to come to an end. The way that our laws and personal policies work now in the United States, the true punishment begins when the sentencing ends."

She is not suggesting that records should be abolished, Baxter says. Instead, she wants the same response that I had when I heard about her project, "I'm not a criminal," to resonate with an honest look at our own pasts.

That is why, with the help of a Bush grant, she temporarily cut back on her hours to collect stories of past misdeeds. Baxter heard about stolen fire hydrants and a series of Port-a-Potty crimes. For people younger than 30, a typical first response is confessing to stealing music online.

She also heard of more serious crimes, such as the lawyer who at first was offended by the question. He eventually admitted to what was, in essence, drug dealing. Decades later, however, he still didn't see it that way.

"For him, he was hooking friends up with dope," Baxter says. "It was trafficking, drug dealing, meeting in darkened alleyways with strangers. It didn't fit his concept of what it was to be a criminal forever."

If you're not forced to acknowledge a mistake made in every turn of life, it's much easier to forget it, she says.

You allow for nuance, justification and context in your own life. It would be good to keep that in mind with someone else's attempts to put their history in context.

She's heard of a pediatrician who, in his youth, blew up a Port-a-Potty. A nursing student, however, had to leave that program when her theft of a bicycle in her early teens became known.

"At what point are we going to allow the kid who swiped a bike to move along in their lives?" Baxter asks.

The lawyer's story joined others on Baxter's "We are Criminals" website. She took pictures of her subjects, holding signs that obscure their faces, listing their crimes. In some of the cases, she can compare it to the struggles of a person who was convicted of the same crime.

A bank teller admitted to stealing a woman's billfold.

Baxter compares that to a 68-year-old man who was fired from a bank for a crime at age 19 when he stuffed a cardboard cutout of a dime into a laundromat's washing machine.

The project also has a traveling show, one Baxter plans to take to multiple sites and would like to see come to Sioux Falls.

It is, at its core, about second chances, Baxter says, and putting yourself in someone else's shoes. No matter how uncomfortably they fit.

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To watch

To see "We are All Criminals," visit weareallcriminals.com. If you want to share, contact Baxter through the site for a personal interview or submit your own interview through the site.

Argus Leader file photo Bishop Ezekial Diing Malangdit pats his 5-year-old son, Paul Telaar Ezekiel, after the boy's surgery to remove a brain tumor in September. Column 2

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Callison: African boy doing well after brain surgery

I tried to determine how many columns and stories I wrote in 2013, but our archive wouldn't cooperate in that quest. It stores both the online postings and hard-copy stories, so most show at least two versions, and I could go back only to late May.

Let's just say it was a *lot* (look at me already making my case for next summer when any salary raise rolls around).

Some of the stories turned into neat bundles. Others left you and me both wondering how situations were resolved. I did a little sleuthing, and here are a few answers.

Paul Telaar Ezekiel

When 6-year-old Paul Telaar Ezekiel arrived last August in Sioux Falls, accompanied by his parents, he had no balance, his right side was paralyzed and the left nearly so, and he barely could swallow or speak.

Today, after Dr. Wilson Asfora performed two surgeries on Paul, the boy has returned to Africa, where his father is an Episcopal bishop. Physical therapy is continuing, but Asfora told Lisa Marie Johnson he expects Paul's abilities to return within the next 18 to 36 months.

Johnson, who met Paul's family on a mission trip to South Sudan, helped make arrangements for the boy to come here and have a brainstem glioma removed. Doctors in Africa had said they could not help Paul because the tumor was in a risky area.

Asfora took that risk, and it paid off. When Paul's family greeted him at the Nairobi, Kenya, airport, the sight of their brother no longer sitting listlessly in a wheelchair caused them to weep.

"They were crying very hard, the extended family and neighbors," Johnson says. "It was a pretty tense experience."

While Paul's family was in the United States, the bishop was taken on a tour to meet Sudanese people in cities like Omaha, Des Moines and Fargo. Donations from the Sudanese in the United States raised \$15,000 for Paul's Fund, to help with medical expenses.

Paul's brain will be monitored with MRI scans regularly to determine whether the tumor has returned. Those who know Paul have no worries about his future.

"He's young, strong-willed and determined," Johnson says. "He should be perfectly fine by the time he's 7 or 8 years old."

Emily Baxter

The Lincoln High School graduate whose project through a Bush Foundation grant has gained national attention plans to bring it to her hometown in late spring.

A monthlong exhibit at Spirit of Peace United Church of Christ will open March 30, and it also might transfer to First Congregational Church. A full-day workshop, "Be the Changed: Using Non-Violent Methods to Transform Your Life and to Change the World" also will be offered that month.

Baxter, a lawyer, used her project "We are All Criminals," to emphasize the need for second chances and to point out how easily life can change by a failure to make good choices.

While she doesn't advocate doing away with punishment, she thinks it must end at some point. Everyone, Baxter says, has made a mistake at some point in his or her life.

Baxter will reduce her hours at work to part time in the coming year so she can shift the project's focus from Minnesota-based offenses and consequences to a national perspective.

Gerald Hanna

It apparently will be a while before Gerald Hanna is walking on a new prosthetic leg, one that won't cause the pain he feels from his 12-year-old artificial limb.

Hanna, who lost his leg and a friend in a car-pedestrian accident in 2001, started a GoFundMe site to raise \$20,000 for the new leg. He has only \$2,145 in pledges, and even Hanna hasn't been on his site in two months.

Nancy Frantz

Nancy Frantz's efforts to revive the local Disabled American Veterans Auxiliary chapter by enrolling new members has come to an unsuccessful end. She herself has transferred her membership to Mitchell.

She regrets losing the assistance the auxiliary offered to veterans and their families.

"It's kind of easy to forget that after the major stories or someone has been hurt, they have to continue the rest of their lives dealing with that," Frantz says. "A lot of (people) forget our freedom wasn't free."

Abandoned dog

Apartment-complex dwellers on Klein Avenue continue to be disturbed by memories of the dog that was abandoned near a Dumpster earlier this month.

The dog had been abandoned at that site on a bitterly cold evening, and by the time it was discovered, hypothermia had set in. Despite a veterinarian's efforts, the small dog could not be saved.

Apartment complex manager Ron Johnke says an officer with animal control contacted him the week before Christmas to report the investigation is ongoing and they could not say much about it.

Residents ask him often is there is any news about who might have done that to a young animal.

"We keep a good watch on what's going on now," Johnke says.

Me

A belated thank you to everyone who emailed after I wrote about my mother's death Aug. 6. A special thank you to the nurse who told me "you made the right decision" in reference to my fear that not putting her on life support was the wrong thing to do.

The mourning continues, along with the love.

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