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Hello, Neighbor: Connye LaCombe

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Hello, Neighbor: The People Who Shape West St. Paul is a collaboration between [member-supported](#) West St. Paul Reader and [Community Blueprint](#), a local content creation studio focused on telling stories that make change.

Connye LaCombe, a lifelong teacher at heart, spends her Sundays at Amore Coffee tutoring students for free. LaCombe is part of a group that's been tutoring at the West St. Paul coffee shop for a few years. She's been a regular at Amore for even longer.

Watch the [video interview](#) with Connye LaCombe:



"The owner of Amore, Tara, started it by asking a couple of the people that are regulars here that she knew had doctorates if they would like to tutor, and I found out about it and asked if I could join them," LaCombe said.

"We volunteer to come in on Sundays and work with kids," LaCombe said.

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The group tutors people of all ages, helping with everything from elementary to calculus homework. “We had somebody come in and ask us if we could proofread their master’s thesis and we did that.”

LaCombe spent most of her career teaching at Saint Paul public schools. In her retirement, she’s found that tutoring at Amore fulfills her, because helping students again feels good.

“For me, I retired from teaching, it gives me my kid fix,” LaCombe said. “I get to work with students, which brings me great joy.”

“I didn’t retire by choice. I retired because I was ill and couldn’t teach anymore, and so it was a forced retirement. Otherwise they probably would’ve had to drive me out of my classroom in a wooden box. I’ve always loved teaching,” she said.

Serving the Community

LaCombe moved to West St. Paul in 1994, and has since become actively involved in the community.

“We moved here from Saint Paul and we moved because my husband had a heart attack and I didn’t want to be in an old two-story house,” she said. “We found a one-story house in West St. Paul and we really appreciated the low property taxes.”

LaCombe was also appointed to the West St. Paul Environmental Committee in July 2021 and she held her seat for three and a half years.

“I told them when I interviewed for the Environmental Committee that I have two passions, equity and the environment.”

The committee advises on a number of things, from suggesting sustainable native plants for new landscaping to salt use to park development.

LaCombe’s proudest accomplishment on the committee is that they plant trees annually. The first tree they planted was a plum tree, and LaCombe hopes that the fruit can be harvested by the community.

LaCombe recently resigned from her position on the committee, and she says it’s time to get new people with new perspectives involved. “I think it’s time to open it up to new people, and there are [more people volunteering](#) for committees now in West St. Paul, which I think is just awesome.”

Community Advocate

In 2021 Connye LaCombe was awarded the first ever West St. Paul Pride in the Park [Community Advocate Award](#). According to LaCombe, her daughter, who is transgender, advocated for her to receive the award for the work she did with West St. Paul Pride and her support for a gay conversion therapy ban in West St. Paul.

“I’ve gotten a number of awards throughout the years with relation to my teaching. I mean, I had three presidential awards. I had two Super America Teacher of the Year Awards and so forth and so on. But this one was really special because it was aimed at the heart,” LaCombe said.

In all her years of teaching and tutoring, LaCombe says she’s worked with kids of all genders.

“When I was teaching junior high, I knew which kids were gay. It wasn’t that junior high, that anybody, had taught them to be gay. That’s just who they were. And they were just as precious to me as any other kid in the class.”

LaCombe expressed frustration for the potential elimination of Diversity, Equity & Inclusion (DEI) programs, stressing the importance of such programs for educators.

“I do training for Education Minnesota in a course called Cultural Competency,” LaCombe said. “It’s something that people need to be aware of. And doing the trainings helps to open people’s

eyes.”

“A person can’t change who they are in the depths of their being,” she said. “You can’t indoctrinate someone into being gay or bi or trans. It’s the way that you’re born.”

Get Involved

After LaCombe retired from teaching, she had more time to be involved in the West St. Paul community. “I love it,” she said. “It keeps me out of trouble. And there’s so many wonderful, warm, welcoming people, and the City Council listens to us and not all city councils do that and so I really, I appreciate it.”

LaCombe’s involvement in West St. Paul, including tutoring at Amore, serving on the environmental committee, and regularly attending City Council meetings and other community events, has given her a sense of community.

“I feel it’s important to be engaged and occupied and doing things for your community and with your community because the community is made of a lot of different individuals and by being involved, you help shape the way the community is. You help shape the environment in which other people live,” she said. “If you want a good community, then get involved.”

LaCombe has hope for the future of West St. Paul. “Yeah, I think we’ve got a good community base to start with and it can only get better.”

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