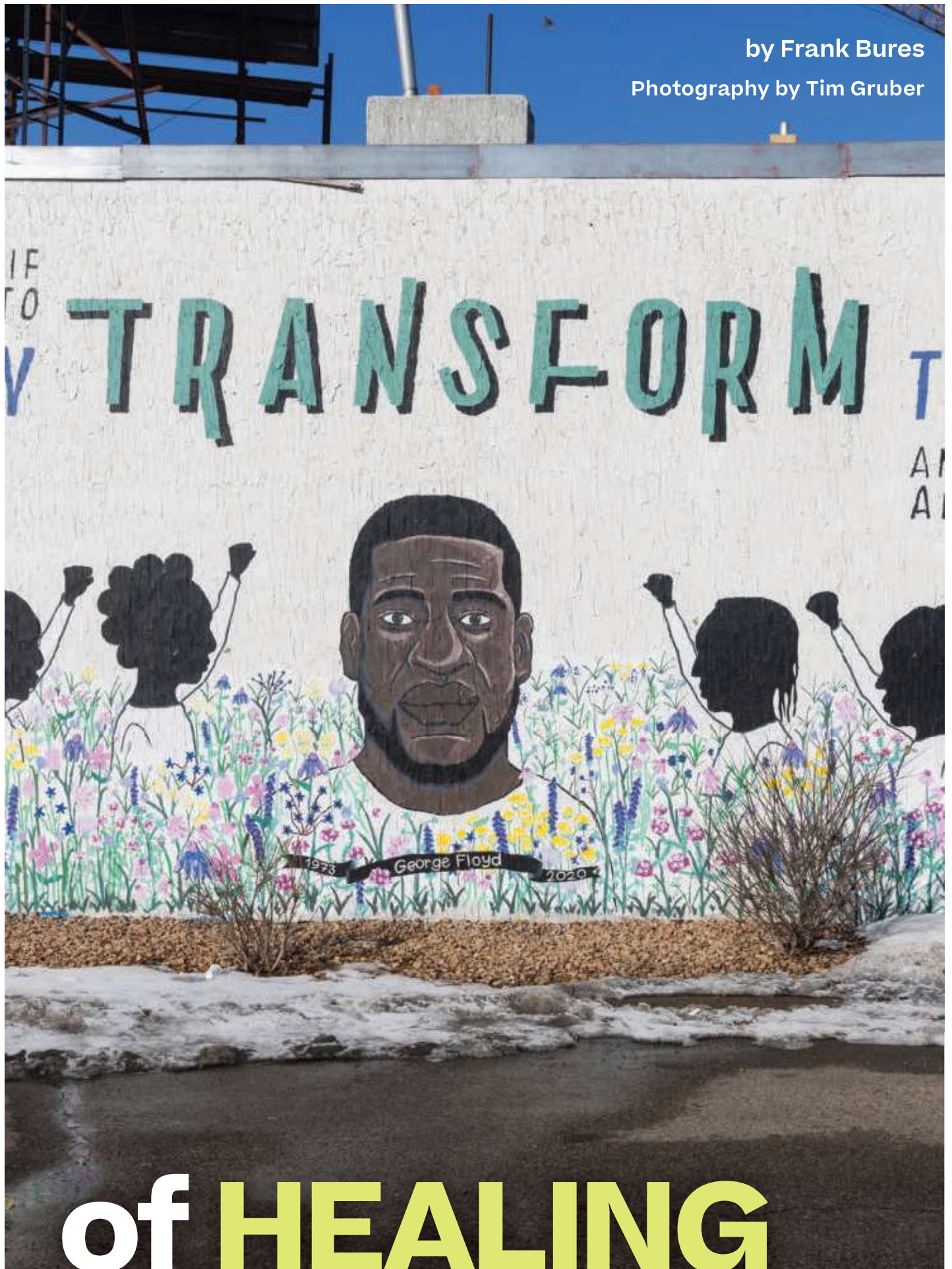


the BUSINESS

Vanessa Machuca's clothing store was one of several small businesses that Rotary clubs helped recover from riot damage following the murder of George Floyd.



by Frank Bures
Photography by Tim Gruber



of **HEALING**

For as long as most people in Minneapolis can remember, Lake Street has been a kind of melting pot in an otherwise Scandinavian-hued city. The 6-mile stretch is full of Mexican markets, African goods stores, halal butchers, South American restaurants, theaters, libraries, pawn shops, boutiques, and fine dining establishments. Driving down the street, to a motorist with the windows open it usually smelled like the world had come to Minnesota.

But in late May 2020, it smelled like smoke, as the rage over the murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis police boiled over into a full-scale riot.

The day the video went public of George Floyd pleading for his life as officer Derek Chauvin kneeled on his neck and the life ebbed out of him, peaceful protests against police brutality and racial inequality occurred across Minneapolis. That night, public outrage quickly boiled over into violence as thousands of people marched from the site of Floyd's death to the police station on Lake Street where all four police officers involved were based.

Amina Osman watched the crowd build all day from the windows of her family's business near Lake Street, a small retail shipping store called Post Plus. By late afternoon, when more people began to congregate in front of the police station, she had a feeling they should close early. So she locked the doors at 5 p.m.

On her way out, Osman, a young woman who had immigrated from Somalia when she was in middle school, stopped to talk to one of the protesters, and she found out about the video. When Osman got home, she turned on the television and watched as her city imploded. She saw that the doors of the Target across the parking lot from Post Plus had been smashed open, the store emptied and ransacked. Then she watched some looters move on to other buildings in the shopping complex. One by one, the buildings around hers were looted and burned.

Early the next morning, she and her employees rushed back to Lake Street. In addition to Post Plus, her family owned a home health care business two doors down. After seeing the looting, she knew they had to save their patients' medical information.

"It was really chaotic," Osman recalls. "There were gunshots. We wanted to evacuate our client files, because they contained HIPAA information, so I wasn't concentrating on Post Plus so much. But when I went over to look at it, the doors and windows were broken. People were just running in and out, looting and destroying things. I was shocked. It was difficult to even process what was going on. I was like, 'Am I sleeping? Is this a nightmare that I'm going to wake up from?' But it was real."



Amina Osman is the manager of Post Plus, a retail packing and shipping business on Lake Street in Minneapolis.

THAT SAME DAY, Suzanne Kochevar was sitting at home in the town of Excelsior, outside Minneapolis. On the television in her living room, she, too, was watching the city in flames. One of her brothers lived near the Lake Street police station, and she knew the area well. A retired commercial designer and a member of the Rotary Club of Lake Minnetonka-Excelsior, Kochevar knew that something had to change.

“Lake Street has always been a special place,” she says. “There are so many immigrants and so many immigrant businesses. And to watch all that happening, I can’t even tell you the emotions I went through. That whole night, I just kept thinking, ‘What can we do? What can I do?’”

In the days after Floyd’s murder, rioting continued and large swaths of the city burned, and the air was thick with smoke. Broken glass littered all 6 miles of Lake Street. Graffiti covered the walls and storefronts. Eventually the National Guard was called in and order was slowly restored, but not before some 1,500 businesses were damaged and dozens were burned to the ground. The damage on Lake Street alone was estimated at \$250 million.

Taking all this in, Kochevar had an idea. If there’s one thing many Rotary members know, it’s business. Perhaps there was a way they could help some of these businesses recover. Kochevar, who can run a meeting with military efficiency, contacted the staff at Lake Street Council, an organization that supports businesses along Lake Street, and told them that members of local clubs could use their business acumen to help. At the time, the council was overwhelmed with its newfound responsibility. “We were a four-person staff,” says ZoeAna Martinez, the council’s senior community engagement manager. “We were a business association that became a disaster relief organization.”

Nonetheless, the council liked Kochevar’s idea and told her to check back later — what they needed immediately was a list of commercial cleaners and glass vendors.

Kochevar compiled a list and sent it along.



Like so many other members of Rotary, Tom Gump was having a moment of doubt. For years he had been focused on growing Rotary's membership. As the incoming governor of District 5950, he had a list of things he was planning to work on, such as raising money for The Rotary Foundation to fight polio. Suddenly it seemed clear that, right now, something else was needed.

"Real leaders are made when you have tough times," says Gump, a former prosecutor turned real estate lawyer and broker. "When George Floyd was murdered, that changed everything. And we figured that if Rotary is going to be a leader, we need to be a leader in the equity portion of our existence. Because if we don't, nothing else is going to work."

The district had some money left over from a conference that had been canceled because of COVID-19, so Gump and other Rotary members looked for a group that might help them begin the difficult conversations they wanted to have. The district chose the YMCA of the North's Equity Innovation Center of Excellence to facilitate three "learning journey" sessions for anyone who wanted to take part. YMCA executive James White conducted the sessions for around 150 Rotarians, many of them club presidents and presidents-elect.

"The Rotarians were incredible," White says. "I was surprised at their receptivity. With George Floyd, with the unrest and the protests, as well as COVID, we were all experiencing a collective trauma, so I think there was a vulnerability to learn."

The sessions centered on what White

calls "creating a better story." They looked at America's history, its 246 years of slavery — about nine generations — and how even after the Civil War, systems of racial oppression remained technically legal. It wasn't until 1954 that segregation in public schools was ruled unconstitutional, and until 1964 that the Civil Rights Act became law. It took until 1967 for the Supreme Court to rule that the constitutional right to equal protection applied to interracial marriage.

"My parents didn't have all of the assurances of being able to vote, and of equal access," says White, a Black man who was born in 1961. "My children are the first ones in our family born into real freedom."

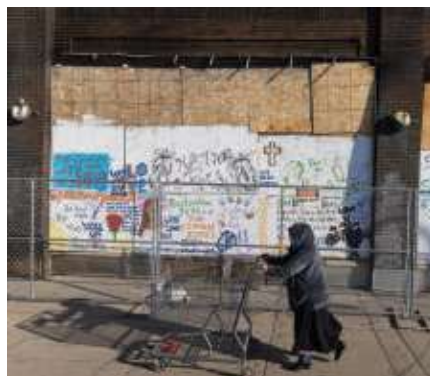
For many members of Rotary, this history, and these perspectives, were seldom taught in school. For Gump, who is white, it cast his own history in a new light.

"My first job out of law school was as assistant district attorney," he says. "The first case I argued in front of the Georgia Supreme Court dealt with a law in which two convictions of selling cocaine or possessing it with the intent to distribute would get you a life sentence. Well, that has been challenged, because 98 percent of the people who were similarly sentenced were Black, even though whites also sold cocaine and similar drugs like methamphetamines. I never realized that I, a young guy trying to do the right thing out of law school — trying to do my job — was helping a system that was racist."

The idea of the sessions was not to inculcate a revisionist version of history. It was to show it from a different perspective and have open discussions about what that meant.

"In reality, all we are trying to do is learn how we can become better humans," says White. "And as better humans, we're going to be more inclusive, and Rotary will be a place where everyone comes in and feels like they belong."

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Opposite: Suzanne Kochevar of the Rotary Club of Lake Minnetonka-Excelsior worked with the Lake Street Council, a local non-profit, to spearhead the project. Left: Colorful murals adorn businesses in the Lake Street business district.



From left: Christian Quito, Victor Pacheco, and Lisa Quito are owners and employees of Los Andes Latin Bistro.

In the fall of 2020, Kochevar reconnected with the Lake Street Council about her idea. “Suzanne brought us a list of the Rotary clubs and their expertise,” Martinez recalls. “So we went through the list and found businesses who said they needed certain services that matched the clubs’ expertise.”

It took months to make all the connections. Many of the business owners had more urgent concerns. By January 2021, Martinez had linked nine Lake Street businesses, whose owners had come from Ecuador, Mexico, Somalia, and elsewhere, with Rotary clubs that spanned the Twin Cities and its suburbs. The businesses ranged from a taco restaurant to a mental health clinic.

“A lot of the businesses had no clue what a Rotary club was,” Martinez says. “But having that extra support and guidance did really help those who wanted to make it a partnership.”

GUILLERMO QUITO did know about Rotary. He and his family had emigrated from Ecuador in 1999, when he was 11 years old. For several years, he had worked for an audiovisual company at hotels and event spaces around the Twin Cities. One of his jobs was setting up microphones and projectors at hotels for Rotary club meetings. Sometimes he

would sit in and listen to the program. “I’ve known Rotary for probably the last 15 years,” says the gregarious 33-year-old.

When the Lake Street Council asked if he wanted to partner with a Rotary club, he was fully onboard. “I love what they do, and they’re nice people to work with.”

At the time, Quito was limping back into business. He had been preparing to open a new location for his family’s restaurant, Los Andes Latin Bistro, when Floyd was killed. Then the city erupted, and his restaurant was in ruins. “When we got here, people were just walking out with stuff. Everything got damaged and stolen,” Quito says. “All the windows were broken. There was graffiti on all of the walls. They tried to burn one side of the building. It was a whole week of people grabbing whatever they could. They even brought in pickup trucks and moving trucks.”

Quito lost almost everything: TVs, speakers, boxes of silverware and plates, art on the walls. For that week, he and his extended family slept in the restaurant to spare it further damage. Then, when the chaos subsided, the family decided to pool their resources and start over. They reopened the restaurant in September.

Early in 2021, Quito sat down with project organizers and hashed out some goals. First, he wanted to find a mentor to help him navigate the restaurant industry. Second, he wanted help with repairs (which were ultimately not needed). Third, and most important, he needed to get customers in the restaurant.

Members of the Rotary Club of Minneapolis Uptown did everything they could. They held meetings at the restaurant. They invited friends to breakfast, lunch, and dinner. “At the end of the day,” says club member Seth Tenpenny, “all we did was listen to Guillermo and try to help.”

It worked. People came. They ate. After a year of recovery and help, Quito decided to return the favor. Last Thanksgiving, he told the Rotarians that he wanted to donate meals to people who didn’t have homes. But he didn’t know how to go about it.

Fortunately, they did. The donations went so well that Quito expanded the project at Christmas.

OTHER BUSINESSES had other needs. Amina Osman reopened her home health care business in July 2020 and Post Plus that fall, but she still needed help with

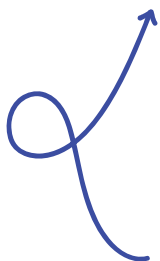
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Rotary members held meetings and ate meals at Los Andes Latin Bistro to aid in the restaurant’s recovery.





In the future, Rotarians plan to work on Healing Path's website and social media, and to help Sulekha Ibrahim develop partnerships with schools, universities, and other health care organizations.



Above: Sulekha Ibrahim is a registered nurse and founder of Healing Path Wellness Services, a clinic that provides mental health services. Right: The clinic in May 2020.



electrical work, communication, and her website.

"We did a business assessment after our first meeting," says Sandra Schley of the Rotary Club of Edina. "And not only did she have those needs, she also had accounting needs. She had legal and contract issues. She needed to do an insurance audit. She needed marketing assistance. Now we have a cadre of nearly 30 volunteers who have helped this one business. It's been almost like an MBA for this young woman."

Osman had never heard of Rotary before. "Rotary and the Lake Street Council have truly been amazing," she says. "I can't thank them enough. I have a lot of people who I look up to in Rotary and who still continue to support us."

The project has led to other relationships. One day, at an event organized by the Lake Street Council, Osman started talking to another business owner in the Rotary project, Sulekha Ibrahim, a young woman whose family also came from Somalia. She owned a small health care

business called Healing Path Wellness Services, which provided mental health services mostly to members of the Somali community. It turned out the two women had much in common, and they formed a valuable connection.

Ibrahim's business was a couple of miles down Lake Street from Osman's. "The clinic was completely destroyed," Ibrahim says. "Across the street, all these businesses were burned to the ground. And the riots continued for days and days. It was very traumatizing. My staff and I needed some time to deal with that."

When she was contacted about working with Rotary, "I did my research [on Rotary], and I was like, wow, this is pretty cool," she says. "I was very interested in meeting people, in working with professionals and building relationships."

After nearly a year, Healing Path reopened in the summer of 2021. The main challenge, as for most of the businesses, was getting clients through the door — something Rotarians helped with. "They really understood my vision and were willing to help me with the important points," Ibrahim says. "For example, with marketing I said I wanted to be able to build more referral streams. So we talked about what that means and what that looks like."

She and Rotarians designed printed flyers customized for different audiences. In the future, they plan to work on Healing Path's website and social media, and to help Ibrahim develop partnerships with schools, universities, and other health care organizations.

NOT ALL THE PARTNERSHIPS have worked out so well. For some business owners, the odds were just too high. Such was the case with La Loteria Market, a Mexican restaurant and grocery. The Rotary Club of Minneapolis City of Lakes helped the business get parking spaces from the city and a grant to buy new point-of-sale terminals, and provided advice on how to update its accounting. But it wasn't enough: La Loteria was evicted by its landlords and forced to close.

Nonetheless, Rotary members continue to listen, learn, and, wherever possible, help. This included an open house they

organized last summer that was covered on local television and attended by Minneapolis Mayor Jacob Frey, who stopped in to meet the business owners in the Lake Street project. "Many of these businesses hadn't had anyone listen to them about the impact of George Floyd's murder," Martinez says. "I think that gave the business owners a face-to-face interaction to showcase their storefronts and speak about some issues."

Meanwhile, that work continues to radiate outward. John Bodette, who attended the YMCA-facilitated diversity sessions, decided to organize similar sessions for his club. The Rotary Club of St. Cloud dedicated four full meetings to its learning journey. "They didn't pull any punches," says Bodette. "There were some hard conversations. It was very straightforward. And what was encouraging was that we had between 70 and 90 people on the Zoom calls. Some people brought guests from their companies. We had high school seniors from five area high schools, and they added a lot to the breakout rooms."

One project that emerged from these conversations was Preschool 4 Success, through which the club is now funding free preschool classes for 60 children who would otherwise be unable to attend. "We talk about people being left behind," says Bodette. "But these kids can't even get to the starting line, because they don't have the same opportunity as a kid who's had preschool going into kindergarten."

Elsewhere in the district, Rotary members have started book clubs to discuss diversity issues. They've founded equity task forces and committees. One club partnered with two others outside the district to compile an unconscious bias resource guide. And eight clubs partnered with Wallin Education Partners to found a scholarship in honor of Floyd, which, supported in part by a district grant, provides \$23,000 in funds and academic support for one student over four years at the University of Minnesota.

The rebuilding went on. The residents of Lake Street, and Minneapolis, tried to piece their lives back together. The Rotary members worked to learn new stories and to write better ones. They looked north, to an under-resourced suburb called Brooklyn Park, home of many immigrants and people of color. Working with the Nature Conservancy and a local nonprofit, Tree Trust, the district identified places that had sparse canopy, high poverty, low air quality, and high rates of asthma-related hospitalization, among other attributes, and mapped out the planting of about 80 semi-mature trees to create a "peace forest."

About 200 Rotarians gathered in Brooklyn Park for their district conference last May. In the morning they held their business meeting outdoors in a park. When the meeting was over, they broke for lunch; they had contacted local restaurants to send food trucks. When lunch was over, the Rotarians picked up their shovels and dispersed. They dug holes and planted trees and hoped it was the beginning of something new.

Amid this new urban greenery, they also dedicated a peace pole. On each of its four sides it reads "May Peace Prevail on Earth" in the languages of four Brooklyn Park communities: English, Lao, Spanish, and Vietnamese.

"Would we have done this before George Floyd was murdered?" asks Tom Gump. "No. Terrible things have happened. But now it seems like things are being done differently. After George Floyd, everything changed, and we changed with it." ■

Frank Bures is a longtime contributor to Rotary and the author of The Geography of Madness.