Substack

THIS IS NOT A PROTEST STORY.
THIS IS A CIVIC DEFENSE MANUAL.

By Closer to the Edge and Rook T. Winchester

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Minnesota did not wake up one morning and decide to be brave. Minnesota was forced into clarity.

When Renée Good was killed while observing ICE activity in her own neighborhood, the line between "policy debate" and lived danger vanished. When Alex Pretti was killed weeks later, the message landed with brutal simplicity: this was not theoretical, and it was not contained. This was a federal enforcement operation moving through ordinary neighborhoods with lethal consequences.

From that moment on, Minnesota stopped acting like this was about persuasion and started acting like it was about protection.

What followed wasn't chaos. It was organization under pressure. And that's what other cities need to understand, because this wasn't a protest cycle. It was a community building a defensive system in real time.

This is how it worked.

DEATH COLLAPSED DENIAL AND FORCED ORGANIZATION

Renée Good was not a professional agitator. She was a neighbor. A mother. A legal observer. Someone doing exactly what communities are told to do when enforcement shows up: watch, document, alert others. Her killing detonated any remaining illusion that compliance or quiet observation guaranteed safety.

Alex Pretti's death erased the rest. A nurse. A veteran. A person who showed up because silence had already proven deadly. After that, nobody could honestly argue this was about "isolated incidents" or "misunderstandings." Minnesota saw the pattern forming in real time.

Grief hardened into resolve. Not rage-for-the-camera resolve, but something colder. People understood that if they didn't build systems fast, more names would follow.

That urgency is what powered everything else.

TURN ANGER INTO ROLES OR IT DEVOURS ITSELF

Minnesota did not ask people to feel more. It asked them to do something specific.

Show up. Observe. Document. Cook. Drive. Translate. Donate. Deliver food. Print signs. Staff hotlines. Share information. Watch kids. Make noise. Stand there and don't blink.

There was no spectator class. If you were angry, you were handed a task. If you couldn't be visible, you were still essential. Money counted. Logistics counted. Quiet labor counted. This mattered because movements collapse when people are allowed to turn outrage into guilt instead of action.

Minnesota didn't let that happen. Everyone had a lane, and the lanes connected.

TRAINING WAS ABOUT DISCIPLINE, NOT HEROICS

Untrained outrage gets people hurt. Minnesota learned that early and refused to romanticize improvisation.

Observer trainings expanded rapidly because people needed something more than slogans. They needed muscle memory. They needed to know how to stand close without escalating, how to document without interfering, how to keep their voice steady when authority started lying loudly and confidently.

Training wasn't about empowerment theater. It was about preventing panic. It was about making sure no one else died because someone froze, rushed, or guessed wrong in a moment that didn't allow for guessing.

Discipline became a form of care.

NOISE BROKE ISOLATION, AND ISOLATION IS HOW PEOPLE DIE

The use of whistles didn't begin in Minnesota, but Minnesota restored their purpose.

When Renée Good blew a whistle, she wasn't making a statement. She was trying to make sure she wasn't alone. That distinction matters.

Noise was used to destroy the conditions enforcement relies on. Silence. Surprise. Small moments where no one is watching. One whistle became three. Three became a block awake and recording. Windows opened. Phones came out. ICE lost the ability to operate quietly.

This wasn't confrontation for sport. It was early warning. It was about collapsing isolation before it turned lethal. And it worked precisely because it was simple, analog, and collective.

Fear thrives in quiet. Power thrives in shadows. Minnesota took both away.

INFORMATION FLOW REDUCED FEAR WITHOUT INVITING CHAOS

Minnesota built information networks that prioritized situational awareness, not spectacle.

ICE-tracking platforms, tip lines, encrypted Signal groups, and neighborhood alerts existed for one reason: to help people decide whether it was safe to leave their house, go to work, pick up their kids, or stay put.

These were not vigilante systems. They were harm-reduction systems. Over time, norms hardened around verification and restraint. Information wasn't blasted for attention. It moved horizontally, quietly, and with purpose.

For families already living on the edge, uncertainty is the most corrosive force there is. Minnesota reduced uncertainty. That alone kept people functional instead of frozen.

RESISTANCE DID NOT REQUIRE EXPOSURE

This is where Minnesota quietly outperformed almost everyone else.

After the deaths, many people could not safely show up. Undocumented neighbors. Mixed-status families. Disabled people. Elders. Parents with kids. People already targeted once who were not gambling again.

Minnesota did not shame them. It designed around them.

Food banks and delivery networks moved resources toward people instead of forcing people toward risk. Book drives stabilized children whose routines had shattered. Online trainings and briefings meant knowledge spread without bodies in danger. Virtual learning kept people connected without requiring visibility.

Staying home was treated as a survival strategy, not a moral failure. That preserved trust, and trust preserved participation.

A movement that only works for the fearless is a movement that shrinks. Minnesota widened the circle.

CARE WAS A RETENTION STRATEGY, NOT A SIDE PROJECT

Mutual aid was not charity cosplay. It was logistics.

People kept showing up because they were fed, supported, and given space to breathe. Community nights weren't detours. They were pressure valves. Places to print signs, swap information, recharge, and remember that resistance doesn't have to feel like slow self-destruction.

Care and confrontation shared calendars, rooms, and networks. Someone might arrive for screen-printing and leave with a whistle, a hotline number, and a plan for Saturday morning.

That overlap wasn't accidental. It was how the system held.

CORPORATE COLLABORATION WAS MADE PUBLIC AND COSTLY

Minnesota didn't treat ICE as a rogue actor. It treated it as a system with dependencies.

Hotels. Stores. Rental cars. Corporate cooperation. These were pressure points, and Minnesota pressed them.

Target. Home Depot. Hilton. Enterprise. These weren't abstract villains. They were local institutions making local choices with local consequences. Protests happened where people could see them: storefronts, headquarters, hotel entrances, rental counters.

Boycotts were not moral purity tests. They were leverage. Temporary, targeted pressure tied to specific behavior. Stop supporting enforcement operations and the pressure eases. Keep going and the noise continues.

Workers were not blamed. Decisions were traced upward, where they belonged. That discipline prevented companies from hiding behind employees and kept labor allies in the fold.

Once collaboration became visible, neutrality collapsed.

WHEN A CHURCH BECAME A SITE OF CONFRONTATION

The conflict didn't stay politely contained.

When community leaders including Nekima Levy Armstrong and others protested inside

a church service, it wasn't about shock value. It was about refusing to let moral authority hide behind ritual. It forced a question into sacred space: what does sanctuary mean when violence is happening outside the doors?

The arrests that followed made something else clear. Resistance in Minnesota was no longer confined to approved protest zones. It had entered everyday civic life. Churches. Neighborhoods. Businesses. That expansion unnerved power because it removed safe compartments.

The message was unmistakable: there would be no comfortable distance from the consequences.

DOCUMENTATION OWNED THE TIMELINE

Minnesota did not wait for permission to tell its story.

Observers documented events as they happened and forced them into public view before official statements could scrub them clean. This wasn't about virality. It was about control. When the story starts on the street instead of at a podium, spin arrives late and weakened.

Owning the timeline meant owning reality.

BACKLASH WAS EXPECTED, NOT FEARED

Intimidation came. Arrests came. Violence came. Grief came.

Minnesota didn't act shocked. Legal support was ready. Media pressure escalated. Solidarity deepened. Each attempt to scare people off taught them how to protect each other better.

Repression didn't end the response. It widened it.

THIS WORKED BECAUSE IT WAS INFRASTRUCTURE, NOT SPECTACLE

Minnesota didn't "win" anything through a single march or viral moment. It built systems people could plug into on a random Tuesday or a sleepless night. Systems that didn't require heroics, just consistency. Systems that assumed fear and designed around it instead of shaming it.

Other cities keep asking how to replicate this.

Here’s the unglamorous truth.

You don’t need better slogans.

You need training.

You need redundancy.

You need care.

You need information discipline.

You need pressure applied where power depends on cooperation.

You need repetition.

Minnesota didn’t fight ICE as an idea. It fought ICE as a system.

And that’s why the response held.

That’s the manual.

Closer to the Edge documents power in real time, connects the dots others won’t, and publishes clear, relentless journalism that refuses to look away when the truth gets ugly.

The New York Times

They Don’t Tell You How Fun the Resistance Can Be

By Will McGrath
February 18, 2026

In the resistance we drive minivans, we take ’em low and slow down Nicollet Avenue, our trunks stuffed with hockey skates and scuffed Frisbees and cardboard Costco flats. We drive Odysseys and Siennas, we drive Voyagers and Pacificas, we like it when the back end goes ka-thunk over speed bumps, shaking loose the Goldfish dust. One of our kids wrote “wash me” on the van’s exterior, etched it into the gray scurf of frozen Minneapolis slush. Our floor mats smell like mildew from the snowmelt.

In the resistance we play Idles loud, we prefer British punk, turn the volume up, “Danny Nedelko,” please and thank you — we cast that song like a protective spell across our minivans: Let us be bulletproof, let us be invisible. We double-check the address, two new kids in the car pool today, three more families requesting rides in the Signal chat. We scan our phones to see which intersections to avoid: armed ICE action in Powderhorn; saw a protester get pushed down. This is in the weeks following the killing of Alex Pretti by federal agents. Following the killing of Renee Good by a federal agent.

In the resistance we drive the high school car pool, that holy responsibility, the ferrying of innocents among the wolves. We drive kids we’ve never met before from families afraid to leave their houses, and most mornings we’re in our pajamas, a staling doughnut grabbed with yesterday’s cold coffee, teeth unbrushed — and OK, fine, that might just be me. You wouldn’t be the first to cock an eyebrow at my personal hygiene.

And OK, fine, I don’t even drive a minivan, if you’re going to be pedantic — it’s a dark Chevy Traverse that looks just like an ICE truck. So in those subzero mornings, when I pull up in front of a new address, I roll the window down and shine my smiley pink face into the day — I know how this looks, sorry, sorry! — and I wave wave wave my cartoon wave right up to the point where those eyes peering from behind bent mini blinds register the thought: No… no, I do not think that man could be ICE.

We’ve been doing this since December, eight weeks going on nine going on who knows. Kids stopped going to school when thousands of ICE officers arrived in Minnesota. They didn’t want to take the buses anymore, their parents too nervous to release their children onto the block, lest they get swept up by masked agents in flak jackets. This was before the 5-year-old in the blue bunny hat got taken, before a fourth grader in Columbia Heights disappeared, before my middle child’s middle school went into lockdown because ICE trucks were prowling outside her algebra classroom. A network of neighborhood moms and dads bloomed organically, divvying rides, vetting newcomers.

There were no open calls, just friends talking with other friends, seeing who might want to help.

Today I'm driving a boy with big bright eyes and floppy hair and golden retriever vibes. He's got his guitar case this afternoon, performed something for the class, and when I ask about it he smiles and nods and looks down at his seat. (I won't name any of the kids I drive out of fear of government reprisal.)

Today I'm driving a girl with red lipstick and a gentle, cautious smile. Today I'm driving those sweet, shy sisters who politely take doughnuts from my proffered box even though they never eat them in the car. Today I'm driving the dignified and serious girl who told me English is her favorite class. They're reading "Romeo and Juliet," they're writing sonnets. She told me next year she wants to take A.P. English. Today she's going downtown to the protest, going because her parents can't leave the house. Her father came out to shake my hand the first day I picked her up. Most mornings her mother waves from behind a cracked door. They've postponed her quinceañera for now; Mom says it's going to be a Sweet Sixteen next year.

Today I'm driving a boy with braces and unstylish glasses, a dazed and daffy air. He's always smiling about something. He is last on my drop-off list, four different stops today, and he was squeezed into the far back next to a girl in his grade. Am I wrong to think that neither was leaning away from the other, may in fact have been scrunching in a little closer? A gentleman never tells. Just before we reach his house I ask how his day went and he jolt-snorts awake, laughing. Oh, man, I was up so late last night, playing video games with my friends, he says. He's bashful now. My friends are too funny. I pull up to his place and we scan the area for suspicious vehicles. I watch him turn the doorknob, step inside.

What they don't often tell you is how beautiful the resistance can be. In the evening, on the day that Alex Pretti, an I.C.U. nurse, was shot to death by federal agents in front of Glam Doll Donuts, my wife and I drove through Minneapolis. There were candlelight vigils on nearly every corner we passed, some corners with four or five people cupping tiny flames, some corners with 50 neighbors milling about, communing, singing, stoking a firepit hauled to the sidewalk, lighting up the little Weber grill, just hanging out in the frozen dark.

What they don't often tell you is how fun the resistance can be: the marches joyous and laced with adrenalized anger, people cheering the brass band that thumps its way down the block, chanting and pumping fists, belting out a ubiquitous profane call and response about ICE.

The biggest march was planned for a day of general strike, Jan. 23, when the weather

was projected to be minus 9 degrees, wind chills reaching the negative 20s. People began to fret, worrying about low turnout, but when my wife and I arrived in downtown Minneapolis with our children we encountered one of the largest assemblies of humans I'd seen in person. Some news outlets reported 50,000 people.

I was not surprised, had not forgotten that people in the North have been practicing for this their entire lives. Mention a negative temperature and the Minnesotan eye is liable to glaze over in reverie — it is a near-erotic sensation, the act of considering which fleece to pair with which shell, which anorak has the thickest fur-lined hood, whether it's time to bring down the warmest warm coat from the attic, whether the heated vest is still charged.

As we tramped through the arctic streets, a bearded dude pulled a wagon bearing a generator and a vat of bubbling soup, dishing up bowls for anyone who cared to slurp. My 13-year-old daughter carried a sign that said "You can't shoot us all," but most of the signs were funny and usually vulgar, along with numerous variations on crushed and salted ice. A young woman held a piece of cardboard with a message insulting ICE agents' mommas; I did a double take a few minutes later when I saw a different person holding aloft a sign with the exact same phrasing, the sentiment universal, apparently.

After the marches are over, after we're warm at our fireplaces, we laugh at videos of ICE agents performing unintentional vaudeville pratfalls on the slicked-out sidewalks, feet swooped from underneath. We share the clips of the white supremacist agitator who, aiming to profit from the city's chaos, organized a march that was meant to culminate with a burning of the Quran in a Somali neighborhood — only to be abandoned by his scraggly followers and met by a crowd of jeering Minnesotans who pelted him with water balloons in the subfreezing afternoon. And there was satisfaction, of course, in seeing that cosplay commandant get yanked from the spotlight he appeared to so desperately crave and retired back to the desert, while understanding that his removal was symbolic, an action that changed nothing. Still, in these unsettled times, one must nurture joy wherever one can.

As the poet Toi Derricotte writes, "Joy is an act of resistance."

Everyone is doing his part here, each to his ability. This is easier to accomplish, it seems, when joy and love are the engines. Outside the Bishop Henry Whipple Federal Building, where detainees, some of them American citizens and legal residents, are being held without beds or real blankets, the grannies of the Twin Cities are serving hot chocolate to college kids in active confrontation with ICE. I know of an off-grid network of doctors offering care to immigrants, a sub rosa collective of restaurateurs organizing miniature food banks in their basements. A friend of mine is a pastor who went with around 100 local clergy members to the airport in protest. Another friend is an immigration lawyer

who spends his days endlessly filing habeas petitions, has gotten 30 people released from detention over the past few weeks. He recently offered a training session on how to file habeas petitions and 300 lawyers showed up, eager to do the work pro bono.

Every day and night, in the neighborhoods most affected by ICE raids, volunteers stand on street corners and patrol the blocks, phones and whistles ready. The middle-aged ladies of the metro area still take their jaunty 5 p.m. walks, but wearing neon observer vests now. My wife told me about a plumber out in the burbs offering his services free to immigrants affected by the federal occupation — and truly, when the suburban plumbers are against you, you can be sure you're on the wrong side of history.

Our loose parent network keeps growing, more than 80 of us now. The demand is greater each week, as people in hiding talk with other people in hiding. The first week we had five families riding the car pool; by the seventh, more than 60 families had requested rides, just in our small corner of Minneapolis. We've started driving kids' parents to their jobs, started putting up rent for people who can't leave their apartments. This is happening in neighborhoods and suburbs across the Twin Cities. We are legion, the local moms and dads, we cruise the city in our minivans. You can't shoot us all.

Here's what you need to remember: There is no reward that comes later. No righteous justice will be dispensed, not soon and not ever. Renee Good and Alex Pretti don't come back to life. The lives of their loved ones are not made whole again. Thousands of people will remain disappeared, relatives scattered, families broken. This story does not have a happy ending, and I can assure you the villains do not get punished in the end. If that is your motivation, try again, start over.

But you also need to understand — and this is equally important — that we've already won. The reward is right now, this minute, this moment. The reward is watching your city — whether it's Chicago or Los Angeles or Charlotte or the cities still to come — organize in hyperlocal networks of compassion, in acephalous fashion, not because someone told you to, but because tens of thousands of people across a metro region simultaneously and instinctively felt the urge to help their neighbors get by.

So in the resistance you drive the car pool. It's fun, and it's mostly not scary. Your invisible shield of whiteness has developed a small fissure. You understand that being a white mom dropping a kid at elementary school may no longer save you from being killed in the middle of the street, that being a bearded white bro may not stop government employees from firing their Glocks into your back outside the Cheapo Records. When these thoughts intrude, you slow down to the speed limit, you turn Idles a little louder, you play "Danny Nedelko" again. That song comes from an album called "Joy as an Act of Resistance."

Today I'm driving a girl who never speaks other than to say thank you. She's out of the car now and trying to clamber ungracefully over a dirty ice bank that walls off the roadway from her house. There is no entry point — she'd have to walk down to the corner to gain access — and I'm cursing myself for where I've dropped her off. The skies are an unsympathetic oatmeal. It is very cold, the dark dead of winter.

Out on the stoop of her building, the girl's mom and little sister are waiting. The mother looks on nervously, wishing to minimize this vulnerable transition point between car and home. The little sister is probably 3 years old. She is in pigtails and wearing footie pajamas and she is radiant, leaping up and down, clapping, ecstatic to see her big sister come home. The quiet girl is stone-faced and stumbling, and eventually she makes it across the wall of gray ice to her stoop, where her little sister grabs her by the leg.

I'll admit: This was the only time I cried, throughout this whole disgusting affair, as I sat in my car watching the girl in the footie pajamas clapping for big sister's safe return. For a half-second I had the instinct to punch the steering wheel as hard as I could. But I'm not quite so melodramatic, and I was worried I'd just beep the horn awkwardly and look like a fool.

This afternoon I'm driving a brother and sister. We've been listening to the radio, which reports that almost all of the 3,000 ICE agents involved in the surge are leaving our state. No one believes it, not really, this declaration from the agency that asked us again and again to disbelieve our eyes, to accept that nurses were domestic terrorists, that children were violent criminals. In the meantime, the official story behind a third shooting by federal agents in Minneapolis has been outed as a lie, the offending agents now suspended for providing "untruthful statements" under oath. So you'll have to forgive our collective skepticism. The drawdown has been rumored for a while now, but the car pool is still booked, with new families requesting assistance each week. Our network won't be shutting down any time soon.

But there is a strange giddy energy in the car today. It's the start of a long holiday weekend and the siblings are buzzing. The first time I met them, as they walked through the parking lot of their apartment building, I watched the sister draw a heart in the frost on the windshield of her mother's car. When I ask about plans for the holiday, the sister says, I'm going to sleep all weekend. She starts laughing. I'm going to relax! It's been so cold for so long, hovering around minus 8, minus 10, minus 15 since the start of the new year. But today the sun is out and the sky is a brilliant blue. The days are getting longer. A thaw is coming.

Mr. McGrath is an essayist. He wrote from Minneapolis.