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Departing official sees racism in Moscow

By DAVID JOHNSON
of the Tribune

MOSCOW -- When she moved here four years ago to possibly attend the University of Idaho, Barbara Richardson Crouch says she found Moscow to be "the friendliest place I'd ever been."

But the 40-year-old Crouch, former executive director of the Latah Economic Development Council and wife of former Sheriff Jeff Crouch, says she's leaving a town where racism has been given tacit approval.

"The entire town seems to say, 'why are you so upset?'" says Crouch, who is black.

She acknowledges many people were upset with her after she told an audience of more than 400 that she was leaving because Moscow is not a good place to raise a multi-racial family. She made the comments during a panel discussion following a local documentary movie titled "My Town." The movie by a Washington State University professor chronicled what some people are calling a cultural divide in Moscow

"I don't feel anyone has endangered my children or threatened to hurt them," says Crouch, "but it's stuff like little kids don't want to be brown, and I'm getting out before my little girl doesn't want to be brown."

Mayor Marshall Comstock says Crouch has a right to her opinion, that he respects her as a person and a professional, but he doesn't agree with her assessment of Moscow. "It's frustrating when we have accusations that this is a racist town. I've had many friends, who are minorities, who say this is not a racist town."

While her disappointment is directed mostly at local leaders and residents who won't acknowledge the problem, Crouch says her ire is directed at Christ Church Pastor Doug Wilson. If racism were compared to pregnancy, says Crouch, "Doug Wilson might be four months along."

Wilson counters that Crouch has taken a cheap parting shot at him and a community that's anything but racist. "The obvious thing is that her husband lost the race for sheriff," Wilson says. "I doubt they'd be moving away if he'd won."

Jeff Crouch lost his reelection bid last November.

Barbara Crouch also asserts local racism was quickly exposed in the pending murder trial here of three black men charged with killing another black man. Grand jurors investigating the shooting death of 19-year-old University of Idaho football player Eric McMillan have made statements, according to court records, that defense attorneys claim are racist in nature.

"If they're convicted, they're going to be convicted purely because they're black," Crouch says. "And I'm sick of people in this town saying it (the trial) is going to cost so much money. That's the price of having a civilized society."

Latah County Prosecutor William Thompson Jr. acknowledges that allegations of racial bias have been raised in the murder case, but insists that race never played a factor in any of the charges filed. In addition to three principals, six family members also were charged with perjury in connection with the case.

"The whole damn family went to jail for lying," Crouch says. And that's never happened before in Latah County.

Crouch and Jeff Crouch, who is white, have a 20-month-old adopted daughter, MinaBella, who is black, and a biological 1-year-old son, Donald Howard (D.H.).

"It's just a feeling, and things that people say or don't say," Crouch says about an undercurrent of racism that she's found in Moscow. "I told my husband when he asked me to marry him that he would never get elected."

The two met, says Crouch, at a Moscow Chamber of Commerce meeting. There was an immediate attraction. "We were color blind," she says, "but my family was not at all happy ... and some are still not." She says her husband's family was much more accepting.

Jeff Crouch has already moved to Norwich, Conn., where he will teach criminal justice classes and be a program director at Three River Community College. Barbara Crouch's last day with LEDC was Tuesday. She left Wednesday with her children to be with her husband and take a new job.

"I clearly wanted to get the hell out of Dodge 18 months ago," says Crouch, recalling how the controversy over what she believes to be Wilson's racist writings and statements became the subject of public debate.

Wilson co-authored the booklet "Southern Slavery: As it was," which provides a biblical defense of slavery. Wilson also recently published a second book, titled "Black and Tan: Essays and Excursions on Slavery, Culture War, and Scripture in America." In the book's epilogue, Wilson writes:

"We are trinitarian Christians, and our absolute trust is in the Word of God. We are biblical absolutists. So the egalitarians are outraged because we say it was possible for a godly man to be a slave owner -- because that is what the Bible says. And the white separatists are infuriated by us because we won't echo their follies on racial intermarriage -- because the standard they advance is found nowhere in the Scripture."

Crouch says she was taken aback when only a few outspoken people were upset by what Wilson wrote about slavery.

"The first thing I want to say is that there are some wonderful, wonderful people here in Latah County," says Crouch, who at her job with LEDC was charged with helping diversify and strengthen the local economy.

"It's that just regular people won't say this is a racist thing." And while Crouch says many good people belong to Wilson's church, she's disappointed they don't take their pastor to task about his views on race.

"If I'm a race baiter, racist or racist pastor, then I'm a thoroughly incompetent one," Wilson says. He claims to have a "happily integrated" congregation that includes several inter-racial families where Crouch would have been more than welcome.

"It just floored me," Wilson says of Crouch's public declaration that she didn't want to raise her family here. "That just came out of left field."

Wilson says Crouch apparently bought into the rhetoric of his detractors.

"Basically, we had a lot of people looking for rocks to throw," Wilson says, "and they found the race rock."

Christ Church, New St. Andrews College and other local properties with which Wilson is connected, continue to be the source of debate over zoning and tax-exempt status.

"They want to make everyone live by their idea of Christianity. Ultimately, if you say you're a church or school, you're above zoning," Crouch says.

But Crouch stops short of blaming Wilson or Christ Church for bringing racism to Moscow. "I don't think it's a racist cult. The only thing Christ Church did was let me see it," she says.