

LA PORTE COUNTY
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[LaPorte County Herald-Dispatch](#) TOP STORY JANUARY 14, 2022. BY MATT FRITZ, STAFF WRITER

Helping to 'bake unity into community' lands La Porte native award, recognition for racial equity



Former La Porte resident Kate Beiser Towle, second from left, huddles with volunteers from Sweet Potato Comfort Pie in Minneapolis. The organization will be honoring her during its Martin Luther King Jr. celebration Sunday with the Batter that Matters Award. Photos provided / Kate Towle

MINNEAPOLIS, Minn. — During Martin Luther King Jr. Day celebrations this weekend, a La Porte native will be receiving recognition for her work in promoting racial equity and community development in the greater Minneapolis area.

All with the help of some sweet potato pie.

On Sunday, Kate Beiser Towle, La Porte High School graduate and author, will receive the Batter that Matters Award, along with other community leaders — such as Minnesota Attorney General Keith Ellison, who led the prosecution of the Derek Chauvin trial — from the Sweet Potato Comfort Pie organization.

The event will be held virtually on Zoom from 2-4:30 p.m.

According to the organization's website, Sweet Potato Comfort Pie's mission is to "advance racial justice and equity, heal damage caused by race-based trauma and elevate marginalized voices and experiences."

This is achieved through the Black cultural food tradition of making and delivering sweet potato pies; facilitating story-circle dialogues, speaker series and workshops; and building multicultural alliances/relationships and youth/elder mentorships that deepen commitment to racial justice.



Towle stands with Sweet Potato Comfort Pie founder Rose McGee.

According to Towle, she's receiving the award for her work with organization founder Rose McGee to make Sweet Potato Comfort Pie a legacy organization for youth and community leadership with philanthropy and community development.

"Identity development is part of the mix, along with education that centers cultural assets as a source of healing and wellness," she said.

"I've provided strategic and logistical support to the community-building model — that revives the African American culinary tradition of sharing sweet potato pie as a best-practice approach for bringing community members together for dialogue and constructive action. "



Towle, bottom row, left, holds up a sweet potato along with fellow volunteers at Sweet Potato Comfort Pie.

"As the lead with outreach to media, volunteers and youth, I coined the phrase 'keeping our eyes on the pies' to focus our work on bringing racial healing and equitable practices into communities, churches and schools."

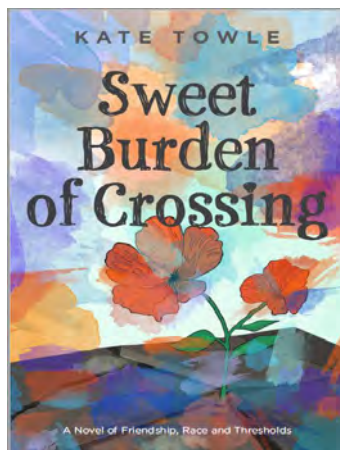
She said this led to national publicity that helped earn grants, including a National Endowment for the Humanities Common Place Grant for racial healing.

She also served as editor for "The Guide to Sweet Potato Comfort Pie," a booklet about the organization that includes curriculum she designed "to build cultural agility in schools and in community," she said.

"This includes an exercise to use during baking events for youth to explore their 'pie-identity,' or unique contributions they bring to the whole, as they bake unity into community," she said.



"Keep your eyes on the pies" is the catch phrase for volunteers and organizers of the nationally recognized group, which uses sweet potato pies, a culturally significant dessert in the Black community, to help bring people together.



In 2020 she also published the novel, "Sweet Burden of Crossing," which follows two college students, Chris and Rikki, one a white girl from La Porte, and the other a Black girl from Gary, as they explore their identities, intergenerational trauma, the dynamics of race and the experiences of Blacks in the U.S.

Towle said it's a fictional portrayal of the bumps and joys of cross-racial friendships, and breaking down barriers of injustice, and includes questions for group dialogue.

Towle's hometown of La Porte features significantly in her 2020 book, available now on [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com).

"Growing up in La Porte in the 1960s had a great impact on my life's work, and is based on my father's work with the Emmet D. Wise Community in Michigan City, now a North Central

Community Action agency in the La Porte County area that has been serving families since 1966."

Towle used to visit the Emmet Wise Center, and saw firsthand "the power of building community — how it lifted people's hearts, while engaging them in community learning and action."



Towle and her late brother, Michael Beiser, deliver a stack of pies at George Floyd Memorial Square in Minneapolis on the first anniversary of his death. Towle rallied earlier this year to move her brother (also a La Porte High School graduate) to Minneapolis from New York City, where he lived in a 6th floor apartment with no elevator with severe neuropathy from HIV-AIDS. He passed away on Sept. 5, 2021.

At La Porte High School, she said she had teachers who, through the French language program, grounded her in the importance of language and bridging cultures. This led her to apply for the Indiana University Honors Program in Foreign Language, and eventually study in France during the summer of 1978.

"What that did for me was help me build a tolerance for making mistakes in the process of learning a new language and culture — and to eventually have a positive return on my investment," she said. "I write about this a bit in my novel, which is fictional, but based on my real life."

According to Towle, the challenge was writing about race as a white woman.

"I know that Black authors struggle with visibility in the publishing process, and I had to believe my story needed to be told," she said. "My daughter minored in the African American and African studies at the University of Minnesota, and told me there were no narratives for white youth to internalize how to develop their capacity for inter-racial bridging."

Towle said most narratives either paint white people as cruel and clueless, give them a pass for marrying a person of color, or as saviors.

"I wanted a book that allowed us to be vulnerable and to have a sense of discovery and real love for people in the process of developing a cross-racial friendship," she said.

"Another challenge was that I was writing about my own family's trauma — that my father, a white man who wanted to make a difference with cross-racial bridging in his time, had few places to go to work through his experience.

"The result was that he felt isolated and demoralized. He had to wrestle with his own deep feelings."

Since the celebration — the eighth annual MLK Holiday Weekend of Service — is online, Towle encourages La Porte residents to participate.

To attend, visit eventbrite.com/e/sweet-potato-comfort-pie-8th-annual-mlk-holiday-weekend-of-service-tickets-226177943317 to register.

To learn more about Towle's book, visit her website at sweetburdenofcrossing.org/book.