

TODAY TEN Guatemalan and Mexican men came to live in Decorah. Our community greeted them as honored guests, showered them with gifts of shelter, food, support, phone cards, laundry soap, kindness, and the promise of much more. We know how grateful they are to us, because they told us again and again – but they have no idea how grateful we are to them.

Could they know how much healing it brings to us when we serve them, whom we know to have suffered so deeply at the hands of our government, for so many months and generations? They have brought us a chance to show ourselves, each other, and them that we are human. They have brought us a chance to be generous with our abundance. After years of keeping our politics to ourselves for fear of offending others, we are openly taking a political position – of all things, by feeding and housing people whom our government has convicted as felons.

We learned a few weeks ago that homes and support of every kind would be needed for

the ten men that would be brought to Decorah. Many people offered a room in their home – for two months to a year – and after considering all of the possibilities the men's parole officers decided that they would be divided between two places: a vacant home on the corner of Mill and Main, and the Catholic Church rectory, with Father Phil. That was decided just over a week ago. Last Tuesday a number of local church leaders and parishioners met to work through the details, after which a notice went out that complete household furnishings would be needed for the empty house: beds, dressers, tables, tv, chairs, sheets, towels, pots and pans, and of course men's clothes. Almost all of those things had been collected within just a few days.

On Saturday the call went out that the next day people were needed to move all the furnishings over to the home from their storage place at St. Benedict's Church. A small army came to help, and in just a few hours the empty house was transformed into a cozy home, ready to welcome the men fresh out of their six months in prison.

Today they were slated to arrive at around noon, but you know how those

¡Bienvenidos, Amigos!

The day our new neighbors arrived.

Essay by Liz Rog

Photographs by Randi Berg

things go and it got later and later. I had offered to Pastor Steve Jacobsen at First Lutheran to meet the guests upon their arrival and do whatever I could as a translator and host. I was at work, watching the minutes crawl by, and by 11:30 I

community have done to help out after the raid, in little ways and big: donating money, bringing food, calling legislators, driving

immigrants to legal appointments in Cedar Rapids, staffing the food pantry, taking them to medical appointments in Decorah and LaCrosse, marching in protests, staffing the phone at the St. Bridget's Church relief office, writing articles, making films, providing legal assistance, documenting atrocities, helping immigrants search for loved ones in the US prison system, testifying, before Congress....

In the midst of all these acts of unceasing kindness and generosity, somehow this was now happening: that I stood waiting for the moment when I would try to pour our whole community's concern and compassion for an entire indigenous people into a few simple words spoken to these ten men. "Bienvenidos. Mucho Gusto." Welcome. So good to meet you.

I would try to put it all into the meeting of eyes and the handshake, because at this point I couldn't yet say, "We are so sorry for what our government has done to you. We are so sorry about the invasion of your country and the killing of your democratic leader in 1954, and the ensuing civil war in which we armed the terrorists. We are so sorry that our agricultural system produces artificially low prices on all the products which you also grow, and that the free trade agreements have enabled all of those products to flow into your country, so that now none of you has land or work. We are so sorry that our arrogant technology of genetic engineering has been exported to your land, forever contaminating your native seed with the poison of genetically modified corn. We are so sorry about our broken and damaging immigration policy, and the border wall and the Texas vigilante who use their guns against you, and the unbearable separations of your families. We are so sorry that

front row l to :
Juventino Lopez, Javier Lopez, Oscar Mejia.
Back Row: Aaron Junech Vega, Victor Sis Tepas, Luis Enrique Quiros Moncada



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was already too excited to be of much use at work. I made it to 1, 1:30...finally just after 2 p.m. I gave up pretending to work and walked to the church (just across the block) to stand out front and wait. Like a husband whose wife is in labor, I paced... truly, I couldn't have been more excited ("emocionada" in Spanish) had I been waiting for the Dalai Lama, or Eleanor Roosevelt, or the new president. I felt my place in the big turning – surely one of millions of turnings that are happening and need to happen – part of the history of this community, of its evolving into a new and positive relationship with our neighbors to the South.

As I stood there I gave thanks for all of the things people in this

Liz Rog, Juventino Lopez, Luis Enrique Quiros Moncada.



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year of in-house arrest, but the pace at which our government has acted has been tragically slow and so it remains to be seen how long that will take.

They walked the one block (our small town!) back to their home to rest a bit before the Welcome Potluck that had been planned only a day earlier, once we had learned that they would truly be arriving Monday. Who could have known how many people around town and across faiths were at that moment home preparing something fit for the Dalai Lama, or Eleanor Roosevelt, or Guatemalan and Mexican immigrants?

But they were.

Steve had gone on a few errands and arrived back at the church with four Mexico phone cards, fresh off the rack at

just couldn't believe that that many people had come to welcome them. Also, the food that these kind people had prepared was absolutely beautiful. It was NOT your average potluck – indeed, for my wedding we had a potluck (believe it or not), and not since that day in 1988 had I seen a potluck this extravagant in its variety, careful preparation, and quantity. It was like a “best of” potluck album, and you know those people didn't pull out all the stops for any other reason but to show their gratitude and caring for these newcomers in our midst.

For my own part, in addition to noting the beautiful food, I looked at all the faces. With well over 150 people, it was as full as I've ever seen the fellowship hall at First Lutheran (not including Nordic Fest!), and because I've lived here a long time I knew 98% of the people, but I was quite certain that never before and never again would this particular gathering take place.

Potluck time came. We walked into that fellowship hall, and I believe everyone was overwhelmed with emotion for their own reasons.

the Kwik Trip. Who got the pleasure of running those down to our new friends? -- the only Spanish speaker among the two of us, Lucky Liz! Have you ever had the chance to bring a man to the phone who hasn't spoken with his wife for six months while he's been in prison? If you ever get the chance, take it. It changes the day completely.

Potluck time came. We walked into that fellowship hall, and I believe everyone was overwhelmed with emotion for their own reasons. The men said later that they

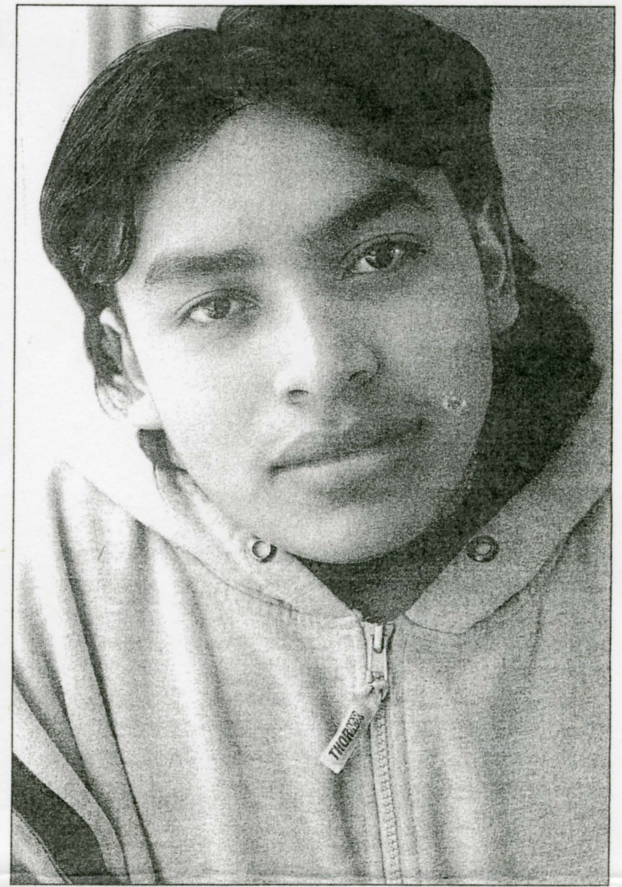
There were so many different churches (and also non-churches) represented there, and so many different mixes and sub-groups of folks who have done this or that project together over the years, and Democrats and Republicans, and new people to town as well as old-timers.

By some wonderful luck they had all heard about this potluck and on such short notice had been able to come or had perhaps chosen to skip something else important. By their own choices of media exposure or travel destinations or friendships these were all people who don't choose the simple, black-and-white approach to this critical question in our country and in our back yard. You know the one I'm talking about, because surely a friend or neighbor of yours says it: “They did something illegal. They should pay for it, and they are criminals. We don't owe them anything.” Yes, these Decorah people who might at first glance have seemed to be a random group in fact all share many things in common, and most importantly they share the understanding that we DO owe these people something – at the very least, shelter and food and friendship while we get our government treat them, and all whom they represent, fairly.

A certain feeling had been brewing in me all day, and finally, looking around at the happy assembly and the food and the somewhat bewildered but contented guests, I put my finger on it. Many of these

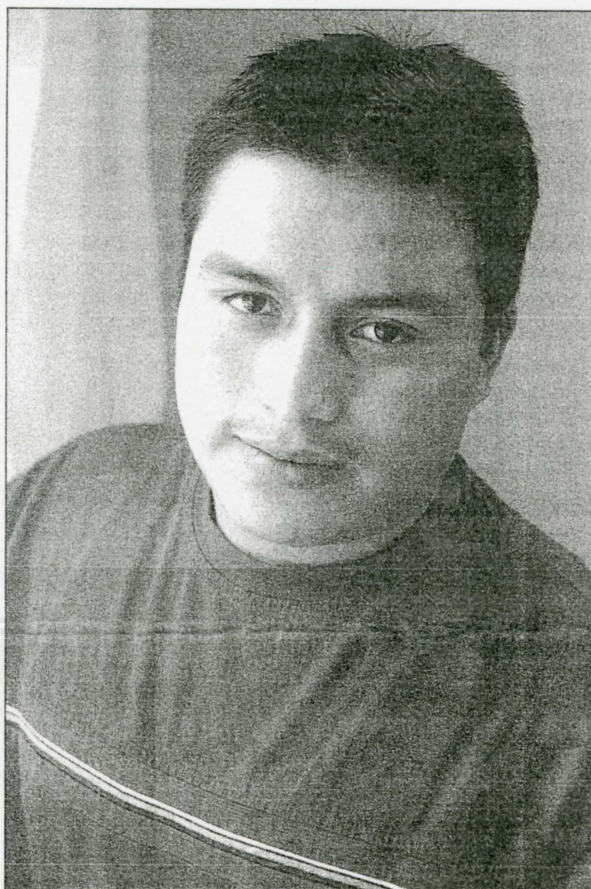
Decorah people, including me, have been to visit a small rural town in Latin America or perhaps in some other part of the world. There we witnessed the excitement with which the whole town greeted us: how perhaps news of our coming had rippled through the pueblo even before we arrived; how the natives to that place all pulled out their finest of everything to serve us, but most of all how they clamored to see us, to hear us, to be close to us. We were rock stars, just because we came from somewhere far away. Cynically, I have to admit, I also thought that it was just because we came specifically from the USA as seen on television.

But tonight I was taken by delightful surprise to see us feeling and acting that same way toward our guests. We were so happy and honored to have them in our midst! We wanted the best for them, and would give so much for them (witness the thousands of dollars that were raised in the collection plates among Decorah churches last Sunday). We were giddy with our luck, and at the same time gently and sweetly awkward in our sometimes shy attempts to make a connection and show our caring. So! We are NOT too sophisticated and separate to go to a room and try to communicate with people whose language we do not speak! We are NOT too cynical to care! We are NOT too busy to bother! And since none of those is true, what is left? It's what we saw in each other tonight: the joy of giving together, with

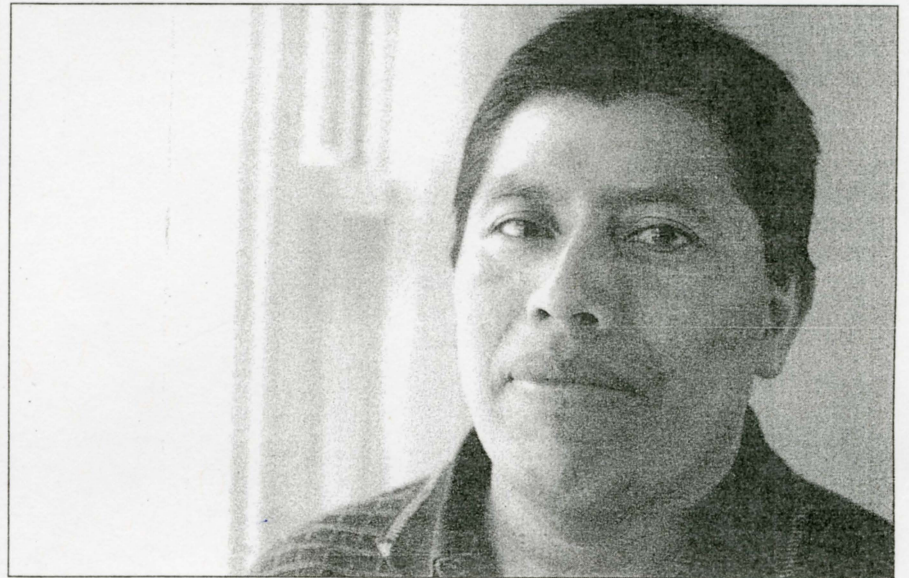


Javier Lopez

Steve gave some opening remarks in English that were the perfect words to share with the Decorah people, then Pastor David Vasquez supposedly translated but in that one case he actually transposed as well, using his knowledge of the culture and suffering of these people to convey the perfect opening words for them. After David finished, his remarks having taken about three times longer than Steve's, Steve asked “Did I really say all that?” -- and everybody roared with laughter.



Aaron Junech Vega



Victor Sis Tepas

the knowledge that their receiving of our gift is in itself a healing and strengthening of our humanity.

We sang grace. We served ourselves food – guests at the front of the line! We ate. Many people came over to the tables where the guests sat and introduced themselves. Welcome, welcome! So glad you're here! Welcome!

David then invited each of the ten men to stand and tell us his name, where he comes from, and anything else he'd like to say. He translated brilliantly for each of them, allowing them to go on for quite a while, most of them even finishing their comments before he began the translation.

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He recalled and recounted all the key points of what they had said. That man is like a champion swimmer in the water: He seems to become part of it, and to not need to think or try, the translation flows from him so smoothly.

Each of them said, in their eloquent, passionate Latino manner, that they were infinitely grateful for our kindness. They said it in a variety of ways: that they would never be able to repay us, but that God would repay us many times; that as it says in the Bible, when you give a man even so little as a cup of water you are pleasing God; that they never could have imagined, just a few days ago, that the time of their

also from the absence of the remittances on which they had depended; and they spoke of how they were forever changed by what they had endured.

They told us some stories from the prisons: stories of confusion, sadness, hunger, pain, suffering, fear, and boredom. They

too long, but I'm sure everyone who was there would agree that time stood still as we listened to these men, bringing stories from the underbelly of our own democracy – stories we know we must hear and pay great attention to, if for no other reason than this: an injustice which a country

looking at, and ever so quickly, quietly, and smoothly they came to him and he to them, and within moments after that first glance they were together in an embrace, holding each other as would family who had been forcibly and violently separated for six months, not knowing if each other was alive. They embraced as we watched in silent awe...and then the tears began – we heard their cries come up from the center of their embrace. We trembled. We cried. We sat in silence, accidental witnesses to this private yet universal moment. We were stuck there with it all – it was impossible at that moment to feel anything but sadness and regret for what has happened to these people. We just had to sit there and face it, raw and painful as it could ever be for people like us who have never personally known such a fate.

They talked of how afraid they had been; how lonely they were for their wives, parents, and children.

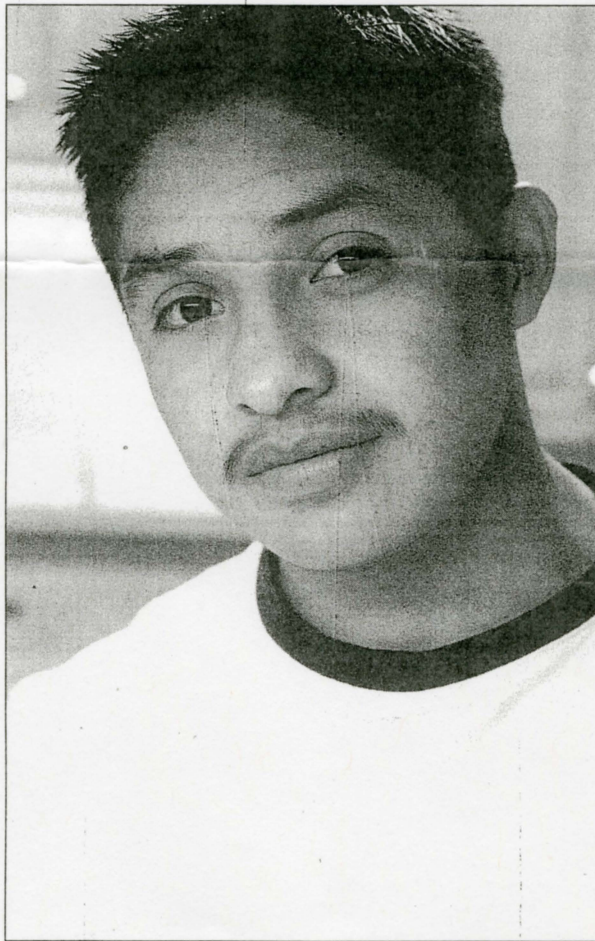
acknowledged that they had been driven by hunger to do an illegal thing (clarification: by that they meant crossing the border, NOT stealing an identity or a Social

is willing to inflict on outsiders will sooner or later be inflicted upon its own.

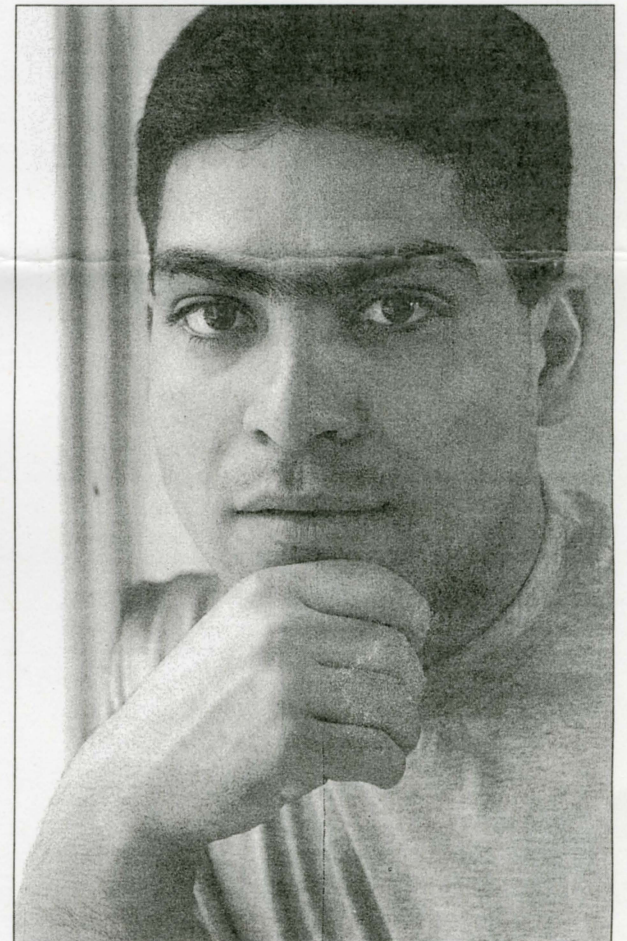
As one of the men, Luis, spoke from the front of the room about the atrocities of



Juventino Lopez



Henri Catu Tala *No - this is Onofre*



Luis Enrique Quiros Moncada, from Mexico

suffering in prison would be over and that they would be in this place now with so many kind people; that they had always thought that there were good people in the USA, but for so long now they had encountered nothing but brutality that they had given up hope in this country. And again and again, that they gave thanks to God that they had survived, that they were here with us for now.

Some of them showed great emotion when they spoke, and even those listeners who had to wait for the translation were moved to tears just witnessing the emotion of the men. Some of them cried as they spoke. They talked of how afraid they had been; how lonely they were for their wives, parents, and children; how sad they were to have had those six months forever taken from them; how their families at home suffered from both the want of knowing where their loved one was and

Security number), but said that always in the past, the risk had been worth it because the punishment was only deportation. That never had they heard of such punishment as this, the robbing of six months of a life and so much more. (We know now that indeed this was an unprecedented punishment that they were

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given, designed to show maximum power and evoke maximum fear).

David offered to take questions or comments from the Decorah folks. The leaders of the event were dutifully trying to be aware of the time and not keep us there

the prison, behind him and over just about ten feet there came quietly and tentatively through the door two Mexican women and two little children with them. They seemed sure that they were in the place they meant to be, but at the same time uncertain what to do. A Spanish-speaking Decorah person went and spoke

with them briefly, all the while as Luis continued to speak to us. This lasted about 20 seconds, during which everyone there had a full view of Luis and of the women as they stood beyond him.

Then he turned to look at what we were

The family went and sat at an empty table together and we resumed the meeting. People asked good questions and made meaningful comments. Two come to mind. Maryn Olson stood and addressed the men, saying something like: you have been brought here after so much suffering and you have come here tonight, and even after all that you've endured, you were willing to open your hearts and tell us your stories, and even shared your tears with us. We thank you for all of this, and we ask you now, as you begin living here with us, to keep your hearts open to us. Tell us not only what you need, but what you want. Tell us how we can help you, because that's what we want to do.

Poor David -- when he set out to translate her words he launched out in English, and when the assembly called out to

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switch to Spanish, it took him a few seconds to catch what it was that we meant. We got a good laugh out of that too! Where do languages sit in the brain? Aren't they all wrapped around in the same little corner? Does someone with David's acuity just flip a little switch without knowing, so that sometimes he doesn't even know which language is which?

It's what we saw in each other tonight: the joy of giving together, with the knowledge that their receiving of our gift is in itself a healing and strengthening of our humanity.

Next Kevin Sand stood and said something else very important. He spoke of the horror we feel in knowing what our government does to people in prisons, as well as what it is doing now to immigrants. He apologized for that, and told them that we hoped to change that. He said that he hoped that the small things we can do for them here will begin to heal the wounds inflicted on them in our names. It was a sincere, serious, sad, and somewhat angry statement of solidarity and apology.

I was asked to tell the group about our plan to provide a host family for each of the gentlemen. First, though, I made an attempt at describing the feeling I wrote about above, of having this amazing opportunity of role reversal, where we got to welcome and hover over our esteemed guests. Then I briefly described the plan, whereby the host church (there are eight) would provide a Spanish speaking person who would be that church's connection to that guest, so that they could become friends and so that there would be someone to whom the guest could express their needs (and wants!). We made a plan to meet after the gathering closed, to introduce host families to their guest.

Pastor Carol Kress gave a brief report from Postville today: GAL properties, owner of the apartments where most remaining immigrants are living and closely tied with AgriProcessors, has not paid its utility bills in months and so the heat and electric will be turned off in two days. These tenants have PAID their (exorbitant) rents, yet they are threatened with homes dangerously unheated, without electricity, water, or sewer. She urged that we call our legislators tomorrow to demand that something be done for these tenants.

David asked us to make a circle for a closing prayer. It was a big circle! To stand in this way was a strong and fitting end for this diverse group of individuals who had just become One for the night though our collective witnessing of these stories. David said a long prayer, in which he recalled the biblical story of Sarah and Abraham, who set out as emigrants leaving everything behind, following only a promise. They were undocumented aliens, who

had nothing to prove the trust within them. God saw their faith as righteousness, and they were blessed. We celebrate their trust and faith. Just like Sarah and Abraham, the Guatemalan and Mexican immigrants have come by faith and are blessed by God. Their faith and trust, however, has not been counted to them as righteousness. In spite of that, we, here tonight, give thanks for their example of faith and their trust in God.

Nobody wanted it to be over. After the prayer we lingered and lingered. The

kitchen crew snapped into action and in a jiffy they had all the extra food packed into containers and ready for the men to take with them, plus all the dishes done. The host families stayed to meet their guest. Someone came to me and said that they had just butchered a hog; could I ask the men if they like pork, because if so the family would be glad to bring over some of the hog. Someone else brought a bag of jackets.

Luz Maria Hernandez, the Luther Spanish teacher from Mexico who along with David and others has spent thousands of hours in Postville helping at all levels since the raid, took the opportunity to meet our guests. Plans were made for get-togethers in the coming days. Peg Matter told them to come down to the Hatchery tomorrow because she had some hats and gloves for them. Brenda Carlson handed me some Guatemalan textiles that she had purchased in that country, asking that I bring them to the men's dwelling to help decorate with a little touch of home.

When I moved to Decorah in 1980, one of my favorite high school teachers came to visit me in my new hometown and pronounced this place too isolated from the real world, too easy, too white, too conservative, too nice. It hurt my feelings deeply, because I loved this town already and knew that it was as real a place as any, just as capable of love, pain, growing, and healing as her beloved Minneapolis. And indeed, in these 28 years since my teacher came and left and never came again I have seen much conflict, resolution, growth, change, destruction, and creation. It is all part of our story, and it's not all nice but a lot of it is much better than nice.

But I have never seen anything quite as beautiful as the coming-together that I saw tonight, as the story of our honored guests entered our hearts, broke them, and opened them wide. We were so raw, yet so comforted by the gentle presence of each other and of them, with their clarity of mind and heart. We stood there in unity as their story began its weaving into our own — and in this way once again we felt the presence of God, as we so often do, through our love for each other.

Preservation Alliance's 2008 historic medallions available

The Preservation Alliance of La Crosse (PAL) presents its 2008 collectible medallions, commemorating Holy Trinity Church and The Holway "Castle on Cass" at 1419 Cass St.

In 1991, PAL introduced the first in a series of collectible gold plated medallions depicting old familiar landmarks from La Crosse's present and nostalgic reminders of the city's past. Every year since then, a new commemorative medallion has been added to the "Treasures of the Past" series.

Twenty one ornaments have been produced.

Previous editions depict early Indian settlers, the riverfront, the beer industry, bridges, churches and homes which formed the city's heritage. Advancements in digital technology allow for the production of accurate, highly detailed dimensional ornaments.

All the ornaments are finished in 24-karat gold and remain bright and untarnished for years.

The 2008 editions

The Holy Trinity Catholic Church at 1333 13th St. South. This Romanesque Revival church was built to serve the German community for worship, education, community gathering and countless family celebrations. It was built in 1893. The altars were designed by the local

Hackner & Sons Co. The parish recently received PAL's Preservation Award for an extensive, historically appropriate 2004 renovation project. The 120 ft. steeple with the clock and the recent elevator entrance are three dimensional on this medallion.



The Holway "Castle on Cass" at 1419 Cass St. The porte-cochere, tower and front entrance porch are three-dimensional features on this medallion, and are reproduced with attention to the architectural Romanesque features. The home was built for Nymphus Holway in 1892. It was owned by the Archdiocese of La Crosse from 1920-1974, by the Carlisle Family from 1976-2006, and currently by Grant and Jane Wood. The beloved landmark is believed to be the most photographed home in La Crosse. Holway



House is a listed Historic Landmark by the La Crosse Preservation Commission and is located in the Cass/King Streets District of the National Register of Historic Places.

Each medallion comes packaged on "velvet," in an attractive gift box, and includes historic information about the landmark.

Medallions can be purchased online by visiting www.preservation-alliance.org. Every medallion purchased helps to support the preservation efforts of PAL.

12th 'Burning Bright' concert is Saturday, Dec. 20 in Decorah, Iowa

The 12th Annual Burning Bright concert featuring vocal and instrumental music of the season is Saturday, Dec. 20, at First United Methodist Church, 302 West Broadway, Decorah, IA. This year's theme is "Ring Out!" and the production is co-directed by Kathy Reed-Maxfield and Otter Dreaming

Performances at 5 and 7:30 p.m.

Suggested donation is \$12 per person (minimum : \$6).

The event includes a 36-member adult chorus plus two children's choruses as well as additional guest instrumentalists and several smaller group ensembles.

This year's concert features a variety of music, including a tune for men's chorus by rock group Jethro Tull, a Christmas anthem of Renaissance Europe, works by contemporary singer-songwriters, an African traditional song, a Bulgarian women's chorus piece, an American Shaker tune -- and more!

Concert proceeds will benefit the following: Postville Community Support (food pantry and related services); The Greater Area Pantry, Calmar; The Food Pantry at First Lutheran Church, Decorah; St. Bridget's Catholic Church, Postville, Hispanic ministry program and The Winneshiek Farmer's Market Association, in support of a permanent market building.

Tickets are available in early December at Oneota Community Coop, Kephart's Music, and Agora Arts in downtown Decorah, IA.