Chris Crowell Keeps Kalamazoo Moving
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FROM THE PUBLISHER

IN THE MOVIE “Cinderella” there was a song titled “The more things change, the more they stay the same.” This saying seemed to resonate with me as I prepared to write this column.

Fifteen years ago I wrote my first column for Encore. We had recently purchased the magazine from Phil Schubert who created it in 1973. In that column I wrote about how I came to be a magazine publisher after 20 years in healthcare administration. But the column really focused on the many friends who had been so important during this transformative time in my life. They were the team on whom I depended.

I also recounted how Phil Schubert felt that selling Encore was much like giving his daughter away at her wedding, and how I had promised that we would nurture his baby and continue to be good stewards of this important community asset for as long as we were the owners. As time passed, this relationship with Encore has clearly become more of a stewardship for the community than a business. Many business owners may find this difficult to understand, but Encore is unlike any other business. It truly belongs to the community — and the current owner is responsible to keep it in good shape.

Now the time has come to pass this responsibility to another individual. Since the official “business transaction” has not been finalized, I won’t say any more about the soon-to-be new owner other than that I am very confident this magazine that was created 38 years ago will continue to be in good hands.

Yes, things are changing, but they will stay largely the same. Legal ownership of Encore is shifting, but the magazine Phil Schubert used to call The World’s Greatest Magazine will still be an important part of the Kalamazoo community, and I, for one, am grateful for that.

As for me — things are certainly changing, too, but I will still be responsible for stewardship of a community resource. I have been given a great opportunity to serve as president of Heritage Community of Kalamazoo. Heritage Community is another important community asset that I, along with the remarkable people who work there, have a responsibility to nurture as a vital part of our community. Begun in 1945 as the Senior Citizens Fund, Heritage Community of Kalamazoo has evolved into a 25-acre campus on Portage Street, providing seven distinct communities that are home to nearly 400 seniors from around the area.

Yes, things have changed over the first 38 years of Encore and soon will be changing once more. Certainly, however, Encore will continue to be published nine times a year to showcase the people who make this community great.

Rick Briscoe
Publisher

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For **CHRIS CROWELL**, 25 years of promoting healthy living has meant growing a Michigan business.

Jacob’s Well in the Greek Orthodox Church in **NABLUS, PALESTINE**, is an ancient site frequented by Dr. Azaam Kanaan of Kalamazoo, when he returns to his roots.

**KALAMAZOO MALE CHORUS** is steeped in musical tradition.

**ADRIENNE and DEREK WISSNER** strive to make lasting memories.

Kalamazooans visited **PUSHKIN, RUSSIA**, to help celebrate a 300th anniversary.
YOU COULD SAY that the owner of Gazelle Sports quite literally ran into his success. An avid runner who still holds the two-mile track record at Loy Norrix High School, Chris Lampen-Crowell says Gazelle Sports was born of his love for the sport and a desire to share his passion for physical fitness with his hometown of Kalamazoo.

Now one of the most successful stores downtown, Gazelle survived the exodus of two department stores—Jacobson’s and Gilmores—as well as a drastic reduction in the downtown workforce after The Upjohn Company and Pharmacia were subsumed into Pfizer. But instead of shrinking, Gazelle continues to expand. The running specialty retailer now employs a total of 150 people, with stores in Grand Rapids and Holland, as well.

In fact, in spite of tough economic times, 2010 was Gazelle’s “best year ever,” says Crowell. Sales over the past two years are up 18.5 percent. “Our industry is doing well—running and fitness are doing well—but we are outperforming those.”

At 51 years old, Crowell still runs about 25 miles a week. To celebrate his 50th birthday last year, however, he ran 50-plus miles a week to train for a 50K (31 mile) race, which he completed in less than 5 hours and 30 minutes. His demeanor is friendly and casual, but you just know that beneath that affable surface there exists the athlete’s desire to win—to get better, faster and stronger.

Crowell, who ran track and cross country for Western Michigan University, knows that what he learned as a runner has made a huge difference in his life. With running,
May 8, 2011.

Marathon set for the first Kalamazoo and fitness has to running for health of everything related enthusiastic support Chris Crowell's grand opening.

With only a week to get ready, they decided on a December 7 open, they decided on a December 7 lease began on December 1, 1985. Eager across from the Athlete's Shop. Their leased, 214 S. Kalamazoo Mall, directly owners of the building from whom they team had a good relationship with the says Crowell, but the young business were able to get additional funding from friends and family, and then they applied for a bank loan but were Gazelle Sports could be born.”

Together they designed a business plan for a sporting-goods store that offered customers more than just the latest pair of running shoes. They initially wanted to build a business around running, fitness and soccer—a sporting goods store that developed positive relationships with customers who were into physical fitness.

Originally the pair tried to purchase the Athlete's Shop, but it didn’t work out. “I definitely think it was a blessing, grace was involved,” says Crowell, “so that Gazelle Sports could be born.”

Still very committed to their vision, they applied for a bank loan but were denied. So they asked for financial help from friends and family, and then they were able to get additional funding from Fifth Third Bank.

“We were still poorly capitalized,” says Crowell, but the young business team had a good relationship with the owners of the building from whom they leased, 214 S. Kalamazoo Mall, directly across from the Athlete's Shop. Their lease began on December 1, 1985. Eager to open, they decided on a December 7 grand opening.

With only a week to get ready, they rose to the occasion. “We ended up having, I would say, at least 50 or 60 people that just came and helped put things together so that we could open. So, again, it was friends and family that really made this opportunity come to life from day one.”

DAY ONE for Gazelle was “huge,” says Crowell. “We had a massive day, way beyond our expectations.”

Were they scared? “A little bit,” he recalls, “but we were really pretty confident because we were part of this community, we had a ton of friends,”

But they still had their work cut out for them. Back in the 1980s, downtown Kalamazoo was not the first place people would shop. True, Jacobson’s and Gilmores were still on the mall, which definitely helped generate customers. But to be successful, Gazelle had to build their own customer base, which they did by developing strategies to help drive people into downtown Kalamazoo.

“A strategic asset to us,” says Crowell, “is that our mindset was to not just open our doors in the morning and wait for customers; we had to be engaged with people’s lives and develop a customer base that would find us downtown.”

This strategy worked from the get go. It didn’t take long for the pair of 20-something, idealistic businessmen to vanquish their former employers. The Athlete’s Shop closed on the Kalamazoo Mall about a year and half later—for good.

An example of how Gazelle strives to become a resource for health and achievement is its involvement in the Borgess Run Camp. The 13-week outdoor running program was created eight years ago for both beginners and veterans alike. The Run Camp, called “Snow Busters” this year, helps runners achieve their goals with the assistance of experienced coaches, trained team leaders, and team support. There’s a social as well as physical dimension to it: The camp also offers clinics, as well as an “apres run,” beverages and socializing. The first year 102 runners enrolled; this year close to 700 runners have signed up.

One of the best things Crowell says Gazelle has done recently is start a clinic called “Good Form Run.” It’s for both beginners and veterans and meets three days a week. Those who sign up are given tips on how to run more successfully and injury free. It takes about an hour and 15 minutes and includes videotaping the running gait of each participant. Clinic coaches then study the tape and offer advice on how the runner can improve. Gazelle works with 15 people a week, and those who are interested can sign up online at www.gazellesports.com.

“It’s a free clinic, and by just offering our services and our information … we can gain customers, but also we just increased the likelihood that people are going to run more successfully, with fewer injuries and more enjoyment,” says Crowell.

“Gazelle sports and Chris Lampen Crowell are into long-term collaboration.” Crowell says long-term collaboration means that you don’t have to be the one that the spotlight shines on the brightest. What you have to do is help build community and help people...
Crowell

achieve something in their life — whether it’s the achievement of an active lifestyle, a supportive community structure, or positive relationships. Connecting organizations and people with a purpose and vision that’s beyond what is possible for anyone to do, and building trust through working together allows us to achieve the impossible.

Crowell, who bought out his partner, Bruce Johnson, a few years ago, says a “free range” childhood in Winchell neighborhood helped cultivate his entrepreneurial spirit. The child of educators — both of his parents taught at WMU — he says he was free to do a variety of things and explore.

For instance, Crowell and his neighborhood buddies held their own version of the Olympics. They also created leagues, organizing the boys in the neighborhood into football and baseball teams, before everything was “super organized” he says. No fees were involved; it wasn’t about money. It was just simply the fun and challenge of creating an organizational structure for boys between 9 and 13 years old, he says. They would play next to Woods Lake, Winchell School, and at Kalamazoo Christian High School. “The Winchell Neighborhood was a really, really nurturing neighborhood for us all to grow up in … which was wonderful.”

When he was 11 or 12 years old, Crowell remembers diving for golf balls at Whites Lake at the Kalamazoo Country Club with his buddies for a couple of summers. They would sell the balls to golfers for 10 to 25 cents apiece. “It was cheap, but it all added up for a kid,” says Crowell. “So there were opportunities for us to do fun things to explore our own creativity. I think that got me going along that path.”

Nationally recognized as one of the top-50, running-specialty retailers in the country, Crowell attributes much of Gazelle’s success to the talented people employed there. “Having a supportive culture really attracts great people, but it also keeps great people, and I think Gazelle Sports would not be Gazelle Sports without the wonderful people that work for us.”

Crowell says Gazelle employs a full-time trainer in each store, and new employees receive at least 60 hours of training when they start. They receive another 70–90 hours each year. “So when you walk in here, you’re not talking to some kid that doesn’t know what they’re talking about. Not only do they know about the products, but they know about injuries and personal health; they know about running; they know about what’s available in the community (for customers) to connect with.”

Gazelle finished its most recent expansion in Kalamazoo in 2007. The local retailer now has nearly 14,000 total square feet of building on the downtown mall. At present, Gazelle is expanding its Grand Rapids store from 10,400 to 15,000 square feet; it uses another 15,000 square-foot building on 36th St. as a distribution center and for additional office space. In Holland, the Gazelle store is 3,500 square feet. Sales at its three brick-and-mortar locations are supplemented by an e-commerce division. Gazelle has even become the sportswear supplier for Grand Valley State University and other schools and clubs throughout Michigan.

Crowell continues to be active in the Downtown Retailer’s Association and served as president in 2004. For years he’s been actively involved with the annual “Borgess Run for the Health of It” and helped start “Girls on the Run,” a national movement to get young girls more physically active in Kalamazoo. This year he’s been one of the chief organizers of the upcoming Kalamazoo Marathon on May 8th.

Crowell is also on the board of Local First of West Michigan. In fact, last year he was quoted in BusinessWeek for an article on the movement, and was even photographed for the national magazine with the Gazelle Sports logo in the background.

“I think there’s a focus on local; I think there is also a focus on health, which is great for us.” It works for Gazelle because it’s what he calls an “authentic brand.”

“We’re real; we do what we say we are doing. People value that and so that comes to bear even in recessionary times. People make choices in terms of where they are spending their money,” says Crowell. National trends to buy local, invest in healthy lifestyle choices, and Gazelle’s authentic brand “all combine to make us, you know, do well.”
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History passes through the narrow streets of the city’s ancient center, past water fountains and stone columns. The alleyways are filled with the aroma from soap factories and the bakers’ bread. Churches stand next to mosques, and the sounds of bells and the call to prayer merge among the din of the market place. All of these sights, smells and sounds give a distinct identity and a name that rings of pride and love to all the people of Nablus.

This ancient city, built by the Canaanites, has survived multiple invasions and occupations throughout its 8,000–9,000 year history, protected by two sprawling mountains dotted with ancient olive trees whose arms seem to cradle the growing city of over 150,000 people. At dawn, farmers from the surrounding countryside descend on the city. Their donkeys are loaded with fresh figs, cactus fruit, grapes, yogurt and milk. They chant in their native Arabic to name that day’s selection: “Khortmani ya teen, Aswad ya inab.”

Historically named “Jabal al-Nar,” Mountain of Fire, Nablus, a major city of historic Palestine, has endured throughout the centuries through consecutive political occupations. The absence of a nation-state ultimately, and by necessity, gave rise to many charity and relief organizations that fill a gap in providing much-needed social services. Whether under the Ottoman Empire, the British Mandate, Jordanian rule, the 44-year Israeli occupation, or under the newly evolving Palestinian limited self-government in the West Bank, many Palestinians have depended on these charitable groups.

Funding of these groups is critical, particularly as donations dwindle significantly due to many factors, both economic and political. The local community suffers under the Israeli occupation policies of siege and closures. Transfers of money by Palestinian expatriates, which are a main source of support for families and charities, including my own relatives, are subjected to stifling scrutiny and restrictions. Donor countries and prominent international aid organizations, including NGOs, provide both material support and technical expertise to Palestinians living in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

These countries and organizations are well-known, but the assistance Palestinians provide to one another is the hidden story told here. Though there are many of these organizations dedicated to the Palestinian community, I have narrowed my
focus to some of the women’s groups in my home city of Nablus. Quietly, persistently, Palestinian women have banded together in groups large and small, to give of themselves to their neighbors and communities. The most critical areas of support these charities perform are in services to the poor, the orphans, the blind, the sick and the elderly. There are no awards or plaques of recognition for these women; they are driven by a spirit of volunteerism that is inherent to the Palestinian identity. The nonpolitical affiliations of these charities give them a broad base of legitimacy, and I honor these women here for the power and dignity they give to their people, and to all women.

During my visit to Nablus this past summer, I took a closer look at some projects run by women and found myself even more in awe of the extent of their outreach. I have known most of these women throughout my life. I have watched and listened as my mother and her close friends collected monthly donations to be sent discretely to families who suddenly became refugees after expulsion from their homes in Palestine in 1948. My generation learned by their examples—and that trust continues to be passed on to the next.

The oldest and most far reaching of these organizations is the Arab Women Union Society. Established in 1921, it focuses primarily on enhancing the status of women in Nablus and surrounding cities and villages. Its outreach covers health, education, social and human services, and relief projects. Over a span of 90 years, the Society has built a nursing college, a girls’ orphanage, and a center for blind girls. But the most impressive accomplishment is the 120-bed, nonprofit, charitable hospital. Originally built in 1971, it has expanded to add a maternity ward and other specialties—its services offered free to needy families. The nursing college has evolved with the community and hospital to provide education and services to the population.

On a tour of the hospital and orphanage, I asked the president of the Society, Mrs. Ohoud Yaish, about the girls for whom she cares, including where they go after they have spent most of their lives in the orphanage. She said: “We deal with our girls the way all parents deal with their own kids. After they graduate, we find them jobs, help them rent a place to live, and watch over them until, hopefully, they meet someone and get married.” She occasionally visits and takes them gifts. “Just like
Palestine

you would for your own daughter," she added. In the absence of a social system that guarantees its citizens financial security, family relations with marriage at its foundation become a valued goal, especially for girls who are most vulnerable in that system.

We continued on our tour to the other side of town to visit more of the daughters cared for by the organization. At the “Nour Center for the Blind,” 16 sightless girls live with a home mother. The girls were working on one knoll as we watched another girl actually fixing a larger one. I bought two shawls that they had knitted and from which they earn their income. When we came back later to deliver some holiday date cookies, they were helping their house mother cook their noon meal.

In another location and on a smaller scale, a little, gated, white house sits in the western suburb where I met Mrs. Tamador Aloul, the president of the Child Care and Mother Guidance Center, which runs an orphanage for children under the age of 6. As children played on swings, see-saws and merry-go-rounds, a 3-year-old girl sat crying in a corner and immediately found shelter in Tamador’s skirt and then in her arms. The executive administrator, Hayat al-Bazz, led us into the building where more children were playing in the hallways. We visited the nursery where infant cribs lined two walls of the small room, while a large woman sat on the floor with toddlers surrounding her in mother-hen fashion. Two infants slept soundly in cribs, which made me ponder their fate had they been born to a more fortunate population.

The center was established in 1928 by a group of women who witnessed poor children running naked and hungry in the streets of the old city. It evolved, since, to provide expanded, volunteer, emergency care for pregnant women, children—and as guidance services for new mothers. They also provide clothing and shelter for abused and abandoned children.

This orphanage is the only place in Northern Palestine that cares for abandoned babies turned over by the police through the department of social works. At the time of my visit, there were 23 children cared for full time by nine women. The boys and girls remain under its care until age 6. After that, girls are sent to the large, all-girls orphanage at the Arab Women’s Union Society. Boys are cared for in the northern city of Tulkarm.

On another hot summer morning, my dear friend, Mrs. Asma’ Oudeh, Um-Mahmoud, drove me to visit one of her many charities, the “Children with Special Needs.” Its founder, Ms. Sarab Malhas, and a small staff deliver a much-needed service for a large, marginalized
AN INTRINSIC PART of our stay in Nablus is visiting with our neighbors and friends, the Samarites, as locals call them.

On Nablus’ southern mountain of Jarzeem lives the oldest Biblical tribe, whose home in Nablus dates back thousands of years. The number of Samaritans does not exceed 500 and they remain a pure-blooded minority, although they are socially integrated with the Nablus community and are identified as “Palestinians.” After the Israeli occupation in 1967, they became connected with another Samarite community in Holone, a city inside Israel, and thereafter happily enlarged their genetic pool.

Curiously, they do not call themselves Jews, but rather Israelites—descendants of the Northern Kingdom of Israel, which was established in 930 B.C. in the central and northern hills of Palestine, and made Shekem, Nablus, as its capital.

The Samarites’ rich history and dedicated observance of Jewish tradition promote an enriched understanding and respect among the Nablus community, and social courtesies are exchanged and shared on holidays. They maintain a close relationship with the current state of Israel and were granted full Israeli citizenship, with many benefits not available to the Palestinian Arabs, like health care and free movement inside Israel and on the “for Jews only” roads.

One of their prominent leaders, Radwan Al-Sameri, shared a desk in school with my husband Azzam when both attended the al-Najah school in their elementary, primary and secondary years. They have been good friends since, to the point that we entrust him with the keys to our house, which we have built on the mountain adjacent to the Samarite village.

Our family relationship with the tribe goes back for generations. As a child, my father would take our family to share their holiday and celebrate with them the Day of the Canopy, the Ursh, where Samarites decorate their living-room ceilings with fresh-fruit canopies, expressing gratitude to God for their good fortune. This comes four days after the Yom Kippur, Day of Atonement, which signifies the exodus of the Jewish people from Egypt and the end of their slavery.
Palestine

population. Its focus is on identifying, screening, and aiding children with speech-impairment and hearing problems. Through work with schools at first-grade levels and families of children suffering from stuttering or hearing impairments, it identifies the causes, whether psychological, functional, or hereditary. It provides a comprehensive service at the center, as well as a follow-up with home visits and parent training.

The center conducts hundreds of hearing and speech tests a year and installs about 170 hearing aids. Cochlear implants have been successfully added to their services as a result of a collaborative effort by South Korean surgeons and a Palestinian-American surgeon who trained local doctors to perform the surgery once they secured the proper follow-up by the center. A nominal fee is charged based on ability to pay. The center also holds special education classes for about 65 young students with learning disabilities, preparing them for vocational training centers.

The group that is closest to my heart is “The Cultural Charitable and Social Society,” which is most credited for its social and humanitarian outreach. Since its inception in 1945, it has worked on elevating and improving women’s conditions of various aspects, most primarily assisting poverty-stricken families. Its great achievement is establishing the first senior-citizen center for women in the area—a new and well-received concept in this conservative community. (There is no such center for men.)

“The Home of Love,” a villa donated by a Palestinian philanthropist, now hosts 13 residents, among which is my beloved 92-year-old aunt.

To generate more income for their projects, the group utilized the space in the large, walkout basement. It added a nursery, a daycare for working mothers, a fitness center for women, as well as a massage and treatment center. It also
runs a separate sewing center for alterations and sells linens and bedding items. But my favorite project is their kitchen located in their downtown center, which prepares the most popular ethnic foods and stocks huge freezers to sell straight to the community or to supermarkets around town.

The money generated by all these projects pays for the jobs it creates and in effect sustains many families. It also allows for the dispensation of monthly allowances for the poorest families they find through their continuous missions in the old city.

The emphasis on education as a social value is the motive behind a scholarship fund set up for qualified students at the al-Najah University, of which over 50 percent of its student body is made up of girls. This University is the pride of Nablus, particularly after it was ranked...
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Among the top schools in the West Bank and fifth among 1,000 Universities in the Arab world. Historically, a grade and primary school, it evolved with the help of Palestinian donors and others to become a university with specialties in the fields of arts and sciences. It counts among its colleges schools of engineering, pharmacy, medicine, and law.

But no visit to Nablus is complete without visiting the small groups of nuns who hold a special place in the hearts of Nablus residents. The first time I met the Sisters of Mother Teresa was a few years ago at the home of a close friend who lives across the street from the high, walled, two-story, white home shaded by trees and surrounded by a colorful garden. At the time, we were looking for a shelter for a mentally challenged daughter of a poor laborer who worked at my family’s soap factory. She had been released from a shelter in Jerusalem after she turned 16.

Over a Nablus breakfast of baked za’atar bread and white goat cheese and fruits, we met the eight sisters who came all the way from India to care for a large group of elderly, sick men and women in wheelchairs. That meeting sealed my longtime friendship and support for the sisters and the honorable service they provide.

On my visit this past summer with my dear friend Shiro Masri, I met four new sisters who now serve a smaller number of residents. The young, energetic and cheerful faces have come from East Africa, Chile, India and the Philippines to serve.

Their free service is now limited...
to 16 adults and six children and is sustained mainly by donations from the Nablus community. The aid comes in different ways, including gifts of food and staples, or paying their heating and water bills. When I asked them what they were short on, they cheerfully said: “Diapers, extra large diapers.” When my friend Shiro asked if they had run out of cheese, the answer was a grateful: “We served the last piece this morning.”

Within walking distance from the Sisters’ home, at the entrance of the Old City, lies the oldest church in Nablus—one that shares the grounds that it had donated over a hundred years ago to the al-Khader Mosque, one of Nablus’ major, religious, Islamic institutions.

As my brother Saeed, my husband Azzam and I approached the church, we heard children’s voices coming from behind the iron gate, filling the narrow street leading to the church. Upon entering, hundreds of children were all wearing blue T-shirts that read: “We are all for Jesus.” The music instructor was gallantly fighting the heat of a July midday, trying to keep up the euphoria of 120 happy children. The big smile on the handsome face of the church pastor waiting for us at his office door told a loving story of the small Christian community totaling no more than 700 living together among an overwhelmingly Muslim population since time immemorial. This is St. Philips Anglican Church, which was established in 1876, one of six churches in Nablus and its suburb of Rafedia.

“Christian Churches in Palestine in general represent every Christian community in the world, even in the absence
MANAGING THEIR DAILY LIVES under a suffocating Israeli occupation in its 44th year is the biggest challenge Palestinians face. When my husband and I visit, we depend on the generally good relations that the Samarites enjoy with the soldiers in facilitating our movements.

On a hot summer day I had a sudden revelation to take matters into my own hands and put a human face on my encounter with a young soldier at the check point.

The glare of the sun left vertical flames in my eyes that the heavy sun glasses could not shield. I drove out of my long driveway and stopped for the soldiers’ permission to wave me through as they routinely do. With a hand gesture I invited one of them to come closer. He hesitated before he approached my open car window.

I had no idea what prompted me to do that as I had no previous notion of what would next come out of my mouth. My emotions dictated the scene as I had just left my invalid mother back in the house. She and a live-in helper were the only two allowed by the authorities on my property, which she had gifted me a few years earlier in order to build a home.

“Take off your sunglasses please, I said to the soldier, “and I will also take mine off so we can look into each other’s eyes as human to human,” I blurted.

His shocked, handsome face hesitated awhile before a faint smile opened up with: “What?”

Encouraged by his smile, I repeated my request.

He obliged and took off his Ray Bans.

We looked quietly into each other’s gaze. He was not so threatening anymore. I continued with a new sense of hope, asking him how old he was, to which he answered, “30.”

Emboldened a little more, I said: “I have sons older than you,” then added: “This entire property that extends beyond my home belongs to my sick mother. Because of the check point, she is not able to have family or friends visit her.”

I paused and then asked: “As a human being, put yourself in my place. Does this make sense to you?”

“No, it does not, but it is the Israeli military law,” he answered.

“Yes: But in this remote mountain side in the middle of an Arab city, you are the law. Do you think I can have a few family members for lunch tomorrow? I have this nice turkey that I would like to stuff, American Thanksgiving style.”

“I will have to check with my officer,” he returned.

Seconds later, as I drove off to greet my brother who was standing a mere 50 yards away, I heard the soldier from my open window shouting back at me: “The officer agreed. How many people will there be?”

Friday afternoon, I met nine members of the family at the check point as they walked under the barrier one by one, leaving their IDs with one of the soldiers while another soldier held his gun up towards them. The three children were shaking as they slowly approached me and held tight to my arms.

Lunch was beautiful, to a certain extent.

Two hours later we had to reverse the process as I delivered them back one by one to the check point before three o’clock when the gate would close for the Jewish Sabbath. I took back my U.S. passport, which, alone, made this rendezvous possible—and I walked back home.

When the gate opened on Sunday morning, the soldier was not there—and I never saw him again.
Palestine

of a congregation—and Jerusalem holds the keys to all these churches,” the Rev. Ibrahim Nairouz said.

As we sat in his ancient office with the high rounded dome typical of Nablus old city, he explained that this was the second summer camp held this summer. An earlier camp hosted 60 children—20 Muslims, 20 Samarites, and 20 Christians. He insists on rephrasing the common word of “co-existence” to “living together.”

The Muslim noon prayer was called by the Muezzin from the mosque minaret adjacent to the church. According to Arab tradition, coffee was served in the small coffee cups by the church bell ringer, Abu Ashraf, who is a devout Muslim as is witnessed by the indentation on his forehead from prostrating prayer and whose friendship with the Rev. Ibrahim earned him this honor.

“It is not tolerance that we practice in Nablus, but rather it is “living together, said the Rev. Ibrahim Nairouz. He added: “Christians in Arab countries are Arabs; they have an Arab mentality, a mentality they share with Muslim neighbors. We live with Islam in harmony.”

“The Christian institutions are dedicated to serving the local community without discrimination and are bent on defending the Palestinian cause,” says Michael Sabbah, the Latin patriarch of Jerusalem from 1987–2008. Nablus is predominantly Muslim, but a small Christian community with six churches, and the Samaritans, ancient descendants of Judaism, peacefully co-exist. The Nablus population is distinctly Palestinian and each enjoys the same legal, civil, and political rights. This diversified structure makes for a vibrant civil society that provides much-needed social services to poor and marginalized segments in a spirit of volunteerism that transcends individual utility. “Interfaith dialogue is not needed,” says Sabbah, author of the Kairos document. “We have been living together for over 14 centuries; living together finds its roots in the one nation living in the one land …”
HEAR A GLORIOUS SOUND, RICH AND FULL,” says Connie Utrecht, accompanist for the Kalamazoo Male Chorus since 2006. From her perspective directly in front of these tenor, baritone, and bass voices, Connie’s opinion is valid and valued. “They sing musically, their intonation and rhythm are good, and they make a very nice choral sound,” she affirms.

Such a compliment is music to the ears of Michael Palmer, who has been conducting the Chorus since 2004 and who promotes camaraderie among the group. “We’re diverse in other aspects of our lives, but the men love to sing, and they care about each other,” he says. Health, families, occupations, and hobbies are topics of “joys and concerns” discussions at weekly rehearsals and after-rehearsal gatherings at a local restaurant.

Fellowship translates into better performances, Michael adds. “When we know each other’s gifts and foibles, we trust each other more. We know how to help when someone is having a bad day. And that interaction at a communal level enhances what we do at a musical level.”

After one performance, a woman approached Michael and said she had never known men to sing so tenderly. “Now, ‘tenderly’ is not a word I generally use to help the guys present a song,” he relates. “I speak of dynamics, shaping a phrase, and manipulating our vocal mechanism to produce beautiful sounds. But a soulful response is what I’d love the audience to take away from every performance.”

Michael’s ability to elicit tender, soulful music from the Chorus isn’t surprising, actually, considering his profession as financial coordinator for International Child Care (ICC), a Kalamazoo-based nonprofit that has been providing tuberculosis treatment for Haitian children and their families since 1967. Michael, who went to Haiti after the earthquake there in 2010, is helping ICC fulfill its expanded mission with care for expectant mothers and HIV/AIDS patients and installation of clean-water bio-sand filters.

Born in Jackson, Michael began singing in choirs at age 8 and made his solo debut at 12. He has a degree in music education from Western Michigan University (1981) and a graduate degree in voice performance from the University of Southern California (1986). He’s been a church musician for 22 years and has conducted or sung in 50 musicals and operas, most recently serving as music director for the Kalamazoo Civic production of Annie in December.

The Kalamazoo Male Chorus, which sings in the style of a classic, college, glee club, has been performing since 1927. “For an organization to last that long is a testament to men who have been part of this Chorus through the decades,” Michael states. Over that time, the number of singers, the quantity of performances, and the size of audiences has waxed and waned. Right now, the Chorus is experiencing a growth spurt.

One new youthful member is R.J. Soule, a baritone who has been with the Chorus since January. He performed in “Annie” and was recruited by Michael Palmer. R.J. claims he has a powerful voice but is weak in harmony and blending. “I joined the Chorus to be a part of a unit rather than a focal point,” he says.

Doug Jones, a baritone who also sings in church choirs, joined the Chorus in November. He was invited by his neighbor,
Rex Hornish, who has sung with the group since 1991.

Frank Unger, a first tenor who lives in Vicksburg, joined in September. After singing in male choruses in high school and college, and mixed choirs since, he says it’s nice to be back with a men’s group.

The Chorus contains a mixture of singing skills. Jon Caulkett, a baritone from Battle Creek, has sung with numerous choirs, while Hank Rohs, another baritone who has been with the Chorus since 1996, states, “I can’t sing solo—no vibrato—but I know how to read music, and I like to sing.”

Both men appreciate the challenging contemporary harmony the group is currently learning as well as their historical connection to Kalamazoo. Hank tells of performances at retirement communities after which elderly men have approached him and said they were once part of the Chorus. “It’s nice to hook up with those gentlemen,” he says.

The four youngest voices attend WMU. Thanks to a grant from the Irving S. Gilmore Foundation, the Chorus, for the past 30 years, has offered a scholarship to students who sing with them. “Our desire,” says baritone Rex Hornish, who has served as treasurer since 2003, “is to enhance the arts and to develop their interest in a men’s chorus.” The students who receive the scholarships need be neither music majors nor from the Kalamazoo area. Most move on to other communities after graduating, but Rex believes their experience here will motivate them to join other musical groups wherever they live.

The scholarships benefit the students, who may use the money at their discretion, and the Chorus, which experiences an influx of young talent. “We’re men of all ages,” Rex says. “The scholarships are a way for us to fertilize an interest in music across the generations.”

Zachary Wolf, a sophomore at WMU who grew up in Zeeland, is a chemical engineering student. He has no aspirations to sing professionally but enjoys being with the Chorus because, as he says, “They’re fun people who just want to sing.”

Brian Duguay, who studied voice with some of New York City’s finest teachers for 20 years and performed as a singer, dancer, actor, and musician on Broadway for more than a decade, brings a professional perspective to the Chorus. Having not taken the storied route of working in a restaurant while awaiting a big break, Brian initiated and produced his own shows and worked as a lighting technician. “That was my secondary job, and it kept me close to the theater,” he explains.

He performed Broadway dance routines with Lee Theodore’s “American Dancemachine,” and he played saxophone (Continued on page 46)
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CALL IT A RUNNING EXTRAVAGANZA. On May 8 thousands of people will be sprinting, jogging and walking through the streets of Kalamazoo. The popular, spring Borgess Run for the Health of It series of running events has been going strong for 32 years. However, this year it will feature the first-ever Kalamazoo Marathon.

The number of people who have signed up for this new marathon event have far exceeded the organizers' wildest dreams. Last year when they started planning, they hoped for 300 sign ups. Now they expect up to 1,250 brave souls to run the 26.2-mile race.

The numbers of runners projected to turn out for the other running events are also high: some 1,500 for the Borgess Half-Marathon, 1,800 for the Borgess 5K Run, and 500 people are expected to participate in the Priority Health 5K Walk. Friday night, 2,000 children will take part in the Meijer Kids Fun Run.

“The idea for a marathon had circulated in Kalamazoo for a couple years, but we realized that the Borgess Run for the Health of It was the perfect event and was at the right time of year for a successful event,” says Chris Lampen-Crowell, owner of Gazelle Sports and one of the marathon’s chief organizers.

Crowell, an avid runner, wants to help make Kalamazoo one of the healthiest communities in the nation. “And we knew that … we needed a large participation event that was a stake in the ground, so to speak, that was a visible marker of active, healthy living.

“The marathon is this type of event — more than a race, it helps define a community’s image, particularly when the community is highly engaged like the Kalamazoo Marathon.”

Where are all the marathon runners coming from? Kalamazoo and surrounding areas to be sure, says Blaine Lam, another one of the race’s main organizers, along with Janeen Docsca, the director of the Borgess Health and Fitness Center, and Crowell. But marathon runners are also coming from at least 42 other states, including Illinois, Indiana, New Hampshire, Texas—even Alaska.

Lam is confident that the Kalamazoo race will attract even a marathoner(s) from Hawaii. The draw? There’s now a national group called the 50 States Marathon Club. Kalamazoo Marathon organizers hope to entice aspiring members to sign up for the local marathon by waiving their race entry fees and giving them a pair of New Balance running shoes.

Lam says they are now intensely focused on logistics. There are a host of details related to the 26.2-mile route the runners will take. Organizers are working closely with local law enforcement to manage road closures and police protection. In the meantime they are also working to set up medical and aid stations, as well as “excitement zones” for runners and spectators.

He expects the race will attract 1,000 volunteers—more than 100 will provide medical help, and these volunteers include doctors and nurses. A complete map of the running route, including viewing stations, will be published in the Kalamazoo Gazette on May 1st.

The marathon will both start and finish at the Borgess Health and Fitness Center on Gull Road. “We like to think that a marathon helps put Kalamazoo on the map,” says Lam. “More importantly, it allows us to showcase our beautiful community in ways that no other event can.”

May 8, 2011
WAR INJURIES DIDN’T GET IN THE WAY OF THE SEELYE BROTHERS’ SUCCESS AFTER WORLD War II.

On the morning of February 23, 1945, atop the extinct volcano called Mount Suribachi, a marine lashed a tiny flag to an iron pipe and raised it over the Iwo Jima battlefield that had cost so many of his comrades their lives and limbs. Hours later, war correspondent Joseph Rosenthal would re-stage the event with more marines and a much larger flag to capture one of World War II’s most iconic photographs.

On that same day, somewhere on the battlefield below, a tough, young marine from Kalamazoo named Don Seelye lay on the brown volcanic ash and black cinders that blanketed the island. His right eye had been shot out by a Japanese sniper.

Thousands of miles away, on the other side of the globe, Don’s brother, Andy, lay in a Florence, Italy, Army hospital. A land mine had blown off most of one leg, and the shrapnel and burning powder had totally blinded him.

The story of these two brothers, Michigan members of “the greatest generation,” is one of patriotic sacrifice, dogged determination and ultimate redemption.

They were the sons of John and Bertha Seelye, born at home on a stony, hardscrabble, family farm halfway between the Cass County communities of Marcellus and Jones. Andy was born in 1923, Don two years later, and little sister Betty came along in 1929.

John, a World War I veteran who had been severely mustard-gassed in France, tried to make ends meet by farming, butchering and any other odd jobs his disability permitted. But his suffering drove him to heavy drinking, and the marriage ended in divorce in 1935.

Amidst the Great Depression, Bertha and the children moved to Kalamazoo where she got a job scrubbing floors at the Kalamazoo County Courthouse. Her pitiful wages of less than fifty cents an hour hardly “kept the wolf from the door.” Neighbors remembered donating gunny sacks of coal to help tide over the family through bleak Depression winters.

Andy quit school in 9th grade and at the age of 15 got a job driving a 1938 Plymouth pick-up for the Purity Dairy. His only pay consisted of having the use of the truck when not working. He rose every morning at two o’clock to deliver milk. Sometimes Don accompanied him, and the 13-year-old learned to drive in that truck. A year or so later, Andy got a better job with the CCC, President Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal “Tree Army.” He spent the next two years stationed near Manistique in the U.P., planting thousands of red-pine and white-pine seedlings. He earned his room and board and a dollar a day, most of which he sent home to Bertha. Returning to Kalamazoo, he secured a job driving a double bottom semi-truck, delivering freight to Chicago, Detroit and other cities.

After Pearl Harbor, Andy knew he had to help defend his country. He tried the Marines first but they turned him down because he needed some dental work, for which he didn’t have the money. Eventually, he saved enough to get the work done and enlisted in the Army on February 8, 1943.

In the meantime, as a teenager Don had developed into a top-notch athlete, strong, coordinated, and lightning fast. He excelled at football, baseball and golden-gloves boxing. The highly touted Western Michigan State High, operated by the college as a training school for its student teachers, normally required tuition to attend, well beyond the Seelye family budget. But legendary State High Coach Bob Quiring learned of Don’s prowess and arranged for him to attend on an athletic scholarship. He didn’t let Quiring down, slugging many a fastball out of the park and setting a school record for blocked punts at Waldo Stadium. He had a stand-
ing offer to go into the boxing ring with any and all challengers. Most who did soon hit the canvas, or, as his classmate and long time friend John Aube remembered, ended up, like him, with a broken nose.

Afer graduation Don enlisted in the Marine Corps. In early 1945, he found himself part of an expeditionary force of more than 70,000 marines bound for the little, pear-shaped, volcanic island known as Iwo Jimo. For months American strategists had planned to attack the island, needing it as an emergency landing field for bombers and fighter planes intent on subduing Japan. But protracted fighting at Luzon and other difficulties delayed the attack until February 19, 1945. Unfortunately, this allowed the island’s Japanese defenders to convert Mount Suribachi into a nearly impenetrable fortress of caves and deep tunnels within the rock. Cannons, mortars, machine guns and snipers could rain death and destruction down on attackers and then retreat into the interior.

Prior to the beach landings, a chaplain distributed to each marine a card bearing the famous 17th-century soldier’s prayer by Sir Jacob Astley:

O Lord! Thou knowest how busy I must be this day:
If I forget thee, do not thou forget me.

The 30,000 marines landed on the first wave on D-day and immediately encountered unexpected problems. Terraces as high as 15 feet at the water’s edge made landing craft nearly useless. As soon as they landed, the marines faced deadly fire from the volcano and other outposts. On that first day alone the marines took 2,420 casualties, including more than 500 killed. They continued to slug it out foot by foot until the mountain was taken four days later. It took until March 26 to totally subdue the island.

Naval historian Samuel Eliot Morison wrote: “The U.S. Marines conducted this, one of the toughest battles in their entire history, with exemplary endurance, skill and valor.” Nearly 6,000 marines died on Iwo Jima or later from their wounds, and more than 17,000 were wounded. Among them was Don Seelye.

Dr. Thomas Brown remembered examining Don when he was brought into the aid station. He told a corpsman: “Surely his brain was destroyed by the bullet that went through his eye.” Little did he realize that, miraculously, the bullet had entered at an angle, emerging to graze his right ear. Ten years later Brown encountered him at a Marine Reunion and said, “Don, you’re not supposed to be here. You’re dead.”

Don replied, “Well, I just came to spite you, Doc.”

Within a month, Don had arrived at Bethesda Naval Hospital, where repeated operations to restore his eyelid so that he could be fitted with an artificial eye proved unsuccessful. For the rest of his life he would wear an eye patch, or, as he preferred, a Band-Aid over his eye socket.

Meanwhile, brother Andy was experiencing his own adventures in the European theater. After basic and
advanced training, he was assigned to the 103rd Replacement Division. In part because of the quasi-military training he had received in the CCC, he advanced rapidly in rank to buck sergeant. A trip on the former luxury liner Queen Mary brought him to England for a short stay. Following the June 6, 1944, landings on Omaha Beach, his unit followed into France as a replacement division. Then a portion of the division, including Andy, was flown to Italy, joining up with the 88th Division at Montecatini to participate in the Rome-Arno Campaign. He wrote his mother, Bertha, that he was really seeing the world, having been in England, France, and now Italy.

Although Italy had unconditionally surrendered on September 3, 1943, the Nazi invaders remained very much a force to be reckoned with. Over the succeeding 20 months, nearly 110,000 men of Gen. Mark Clark’s Fifth Army and 15th Army Group were killed, wounded or missing. The Nazis suffered nearly half a million causalities over the same period.

For more than six months, Andy’s unit remained in combat during the campaign. On dark nights he led reconnaissance patrols into German-held territory to attempt to capture prisoners for interrogation. During one such foray, the squad got lost in the dense woods and was nearly fired on by guards at the American lines.

The next night, Andy decided to approach the farmhouse target by heading straight up a road. The point man made it through, but Andy stepped on a land mine that blew off most of his leg and blinded him. He quickly wrapped a belt around his thigh as a tourniquet, and then he heard the enemy approaching, talking to each other in German. Lying on his stomach, he pretended to be dead. The Germans rifled his pockets, took what they wanted and left him.

Crawling in the direction of where he thought his outfit was, he set off another mine that badly damaged his other leg. He managed to crawl to a lake, and the cold water’s effect probably saved him.
On furlough from the Marine Corps, a muscular Don Seelye posed at Ramona Park near Kalamazoo.

from bleeding to death. A comrade got him back to American lines, and, lashed to the hood of a jeep, he was conveyed to an evacuation hospital. Surgeons amputated one leg and planned to do the same for the other, but a skilled nurse persuaded them to let her try to save it, and by repeatedly washing it with soap and water to stave off infection, she was successful.

In February 1945, Bertha received within a matter of days two letters from the War Department notifying her that her sons had been wounded in combat. But neither communication specified the nature of the wounds. It would be more than a month before she learned the particulars.

Betty remembered her mother saying during the dreadful wait, “At least they’re not dead, and I can live with that.” Every day she continued to report to work.

From the hospital in Florence, Andy was transported to Percy Jones Army Hospital in Battle Creek to be fitted with an artificial leg. What’s more, a skilled surgeon, Dr. Cusack, used a magnetic needle to carefully remove the tiny pieces of shrapnel lodged in his eyes, thus restoring his sight.

Then came the most painful ordeal he ever suffered, when nurses applied chemicals to his face and repeatedly sandpapered it to eventually restore his skin, which had been rendered black from the powder burns.

He was discharged at Fort Custer on January 30, 1946.

The 1947 Kalamazoo City Directory located Andy and Don living with their mother on North Rose Street. They both had found jobs working for Kalamazoo’s Ingersoll Steel Division of Borg Warner. Soon Andy went back to trucking, that is until a state inspector with M-DOT found out a one-legged veteran was driving a truck, albeit successfully, and he lost his job.

Don had a similar experience when he got a job as a butcher in the Kroger Store on West Michigan Avenue. A prominent customer complained about a man with a patch over his eye working behind the meat counter, and the manager fired him. But that patch did not prevent him from marrying the love of his life, Jane, in 1948.

And the brothers persevered. Andy opened up a used car lot and tried his hand at other entrepreneurial ventures. He went to work for Carrier’s Insurance, investigating accidents and other duties. That experience made him valuable to the law enforcement agencies, and he worked for three different southwest Michigan sheriff departments, including serving as the Marcellus police chief.

Andy retired from Carrier’s Insurance in 1968 to reside on Fish Lake near Marcellus with his wife of more than 60 years, Theresa.

Thanks in part to a recommendation from his old coach at State High, Bob Quiring, Don got a job at the local Ford dealership in 1949. He steadily worked his way up within the hierarchy. His eye-patch gradually became an asset when customers remembered the affable young salesman with the patch who always treated them fairly, and they repeatedly asked for him.

In 1963, Don became full owner of the Kalamazoo Ford Dealership. Seven years later came the ground-breaking for the massive new Don Seelye Ford on Stadium Drive, which became one of the Midwest’s most successful dealerships.

“Dealer Don” officially retired in 1990, leaving his sons Mike and Pat in charge and assisted by adopted son Eric Kausrud. Under their management the dealership continued to prosper.

Don died in 1997, proud of his real “rags to riches” life story.

Recently, when Andy was asked if he thought of himself as a member of what Tom Brokaw termed the “greatest generation,” he replied: “We weren’t the greatest generation—we were great, maybe, we thought we were—but you know what—there’s a lot of great guys coming back (from war) right now.”

The Game

When I was a boy I couldn’t wait to be a man.
I scrutinized adult males, trying to figure out how I should, or should not, act when I grew up, when I turned twenty-one.

Well, I guess it went all right.
I played the game the best I could, scored some points now and again, won more than I lost, I’ve been led to believe.

Now, at sixty-three, and the buzzer having signaled the final quarter of the game, with no time-outs remaining and little hope of it going into overtime, I find myself observing old folks more closely, how they talk and walk, or don’t, with lots of gimp and grimace, grizzle and grumble, the geezely groan of bone on bone.

I think I’m back to preparing myself for the next stage, knowing full well that many a game is won or lost in the final moments. Although, I must admit, I’m not as anxious to emulate as I was when a lad.

By Larry Massie

Larry B. Massie, Michigan historian, author and book collector (currently 35,000 volumes in his private collection), was recently awarded the first-ever Lifetime Achievement Award from the Historical Society of Michigan. He has just come out with his 20th book, “Two-Tracts to Michigan’s Past,” the 11th in his Voyages Into Michigan’s Past bestselling series. He turned 64 recently and said he has chosen the Beatles’ “When I’m 64” as his theme song.
Performing Arts

Plays

“Five Tellers Dancing in the Rain” — Five bank tellers speak their hearts in this sassy southern comedy. Apr. 1, 2, 8, 9, 15, 16, 22, 23, 8:30 p.m. New Vic Theatre, 134 E. Vine St. 381-3328.

“Our Town” — A classic American play celebrating life and the daily rituals in small town USA. Apr. 1, 2, 8, 9, 15, 16, 8 p.m., Apr. 7, 7:30 p.m., Apr. 10, 2 p.m. Civic Auditorium, 329 S. Park St. 343-1313.

“The Real Inspector Hound” & “Black Comedy” — One-act comedies by Tom Stoppard and Peter Shaffer will be presented. Apr. 14–16 & 21–23, 8 p.m., Apr. 17, 2 p.m. Williams Theatre, WMU. 387-6222.

“Pancakes, the Musical” — Fancy Pants Theater presents a new musical by Ryan McKernan and Max Wellman. Apr. 14, 17, 24, 27, p.m., Apr. 15, 16, 22, 23, 8 p.m. Fancy Pants Theatre, 246 N. Kalamazoo Mall. Tickets at the door.

“Distracted” — An out of control 8-year-old is forcing his parents to look for solutions. Apr. 15, 16, 22, 23, 29, 30, 8 p.m., Apr. 21, 7:30 p.m., May 1, 2 p.m. Parish Theatre, 429 S. Park St. 343-1313.

“You Can’t Take It with You” — Senior Class Reader’s Theatre presents this charming American comedy about a wacky family of nonconformists. Apr. 29 & May 1, 2 p.m., Apr. 30, 7 p.m. Carver Center Studio, 429 S. Park St. 343-1313.

Musicals & Opera

“A Catered Affair” — The story of two parents in the Bronx trying to give their daughter the elaborate wedding they never had. Apr. 1, 2, 7, 8, 9, 10, 8 p.m., Apr. 3, 2 p.m. Farmers Alley Theatre, 221 Farmers Alley. 343-2727.

“American Pathfinder” — Fontana Chamber Arts presents this Brooklyn-based quartet of percussionists. Apr. 8, 8 p.m. Dalton Center Recital Hall, WMU. 387-7774.

Bach Festival Concert Series — Mozart’s “C Minor Mass” performed by the Festival Chorus and Orchestra with guest Susan Anthony. Apr. 9, 7:30 p.m. First Presbyterian Church, 321 W. South St. 337-7407.

Gilmore Rising Stars Recital Series — Juho Pohjonen, Finland’s bright, young and very talented pianist will perform. Apr. 10, 4 p.m. Wellspring Theater, 359 S. Kalamazoo Mall. 342-1166.

University Concert Band — David Montgomery will conduct this WMU group in concert. Apr. 10, 3 p.m. Miller Auditorium, WMU. 387-4667.

University Jazz Lab Band — Tom Knific will direct this WMU ensemble in concert. Apr. 13, 8:15 p.m. Dalton Center Recital Hall, WMU. 387-4667.

“Fireworks and Fanfare” — The Kalamazoo Concert Band will present a concert featuring Brandon Ridenour and their 2011 Youth Soloist Competition winner. Apr. 16, 7:30 p.m. Miller Auditorium, WMU. 806-6597.

“A Tribute to Tom” — Kalamazoo Singers presents a concert in honor of long-time director Tom Kasdorf. Apr. 16, 7 p.m. Kasdorf Auditorium, Loy Norrix H.S., 606 E. Kilgore Ave. 373-1769.

Chamber, Jazz, Orchestra & Bands

Spring Conference on Wind & Percussion Music — Guest composer/conductor Phillip Sparke will lead the Conference All-Star Band and the WMU University Symphonic Band. Apr. 7, 7:30 p.m. Miller Auditorium, WMU. 387-4667.

Celtic Woman — Hear Irish standards, classical favorites and contemporary hits performed by vocalists, a six-piece band and the Aontas Choir. April 8, 8 p.m. Miller Auditorium, WMU. 387-2300.

Vocal & Radio

Gold Company II — This WMU vocal jazz ensemble will be led in concert by Michael Wheaton. Apr. 12, 8:15 p.m. Dalton Center Recital Hall, WMU. 387-4667.

Choral Showcase — A free concert featuring WMU’s University Chorale, Cantus Femina, and Collegiate Singers. Apr. 16, 4 p.m. First United Methodist Church, 212 S. Park St. 387-4667.

Visual Arts

WMU Richmond Center for Visual Arts (RCVA) 387-2455

Contemporary Prints from the UAC — A selection of prints from the Print Collection that use repetition as a significant visual element. Netzorg & Kerr Gallery. Through April 21.

Annual Gwen Frostic School of Art Student Exhibition — Student art projects will be judged by Yevgeniya Kaganovich. Apr. 7–21. Albertine Monroe-Brown Gallery.


Kalamazoo Institute of Arts 349-7775

Familiar Surroundings — An exhibition of works by American originals that developed personal styles rooted in their local environment. Included are works by John Marin, Martin Lewis, and Reginald Marsh. Through April 10.

The Wyeths: America’s Artists — An exhibition of works by three generations of artists in the Wyeth family — N.C. Wyeth, Andrew Wyeth, Henriette Wyeth Hurd and Carolyn Wyeth, and Andrew’s son Jamie Wyeth. Through April 17.


Art & All That Jazz — Music, mingling, art and fun and the galleries will be open. Musical guest: 33rd Street Band. Apr. 8, 5:30–7:30 p.m.

ARTbreak — Enjoy informal free lectures and presentations on art-related topics. Sally Mann: What Remains, part 2, Apr. 5; A Bird From the Hand, Apr. 12; Who in the World Is Ida McDougall?, Apr. 19; John Singer Sargent: Outside the Frame, Apr. 26. Bring a lunch to these 12:15 p.m. sessions.

Miscellaneous

Good Eats: An Exhibition about Food — Kalamazoo Book Arts Center brings us this juried exhibition of art works that celebrate food, in conjunction with their annual Edible Book Festival on April Fools Day. April 1–29. KBAC, 326 W. Kalamazoo Ave., Ste. 103A.

Midtown Gallery — Featured artists are Steven Hansen, mixed media and Jerry Catania, glass. 356 S. Kalamazoo Mall. 372-0134.

Art Hop — View the works of local artists. Local venues/galleries in downtown Kalamazoo. Apr. 1, 5 p.m. 342-5059.

Literary Events

Kalamazoo Public Library 533-7809

Music at the Library — Delilah Dewylde and the Lost Boys provide pure entertainment. Apr. 20, 7–8:30 p.m. Central Library.

Classics Revisited — Join lovers of classic literature to discuss “Mrs. Dalloway” by Virginia Woolf. Apr. 21, 7–8:30 p.m. Central Library.

Forgotten Valor — Hear fascinating stories about Kalamazoo’s Civil War veterans buried in Riverside Cemetery presented by local historian Gary Gibson. Apr. 26, 7–8:30 p.m. Central Library.

Please send notification of activities to: Encore “Events of Note” 350 South Burdick St., Suite 214 Phone: 383-4433 • Fax: 383-9767 E-mail: events@encorekalamazoo.com
The concept of transformation applies in multiple ways to Derek and Adrienne Wissner, a young couple whose easy-going manner and self-deprecating sense of humor belie the formality of their business. They are the owners of Memories Bridal and Evening Wear, a boutique of wedding, prom, and pageant dresses in downtown Kalamazoo.

It’s not the career that you’d guess for this young couple, who started out on very different career paths.

Growing up in Stevensville, Mich., Adrienne Hull loved being outdoors. The daughter of teachers, she was also a straight-A student who graduated at the top of her high-school class. (To emphasize her brainy family background, Derek says, “Her dad is a math teacher and they do math problems for fun. Sitting around the table at Christmas, they’re doing math.”)

She studied biology, chemistry, environmental studies, and mathematics at Hope College, earning two separate bachelor’s degrees in four years and graduating summa cum laude. She loved plants, and her first job out of college was managing a greenhouse. With her science background and excellent grades, her parents expected she’d become a doctor someday. But Adrienne had also long dreamed of owning her own business.

In contrast, Adrienne was a typical girl who loved pretty dresses. From a young age, she had looked forward to the rite of passage of competing in the Miss Stevensville pageant. “I wasn’t the girly-girl—that wasn’t my thing. I was the bookworm and wore camouflage pants and an orange sweatshirt to school every day, but I did the pageant because it was something I looked forward to when I was little,” Adrienne says.

So in her senior year of high school she entered the Miss Stevensville pageant for fun, and ended up being crowned queen. At her mother’s urging, she went on to compete in the Miss Blossomtime pageant, a regional competition between the queens of several community pageants in southwest Michigan. “I didn’t think I had a chance in heck at it, but my mom made me do it,” she says. “And I was actually chosen Miss Blossomtime, which was a huge honor.”

So it was this experience, as well as her teen passion for hunting down the perfect, unique prom dress, that Adrienne saw as the best way to get her feet wet in the business world—and in 2003, at age 22, she opened Memories Evening Wear in downtown Stevensville.

“Opening up a small dress shop just sounded like … a great way to get my foot in the door with a business, while I kept pursuing my science and botany; and who knew that the dress store would take over and become my career,” Adrienne says.

Not long after opening her store, she met Derek Wissner. A Michigan native who graduated from high school in Kalamazoo.
Ludington, Derek earned a bachelor’s degree in sociology from Central Michigan University. He first encountered Kalamazoo when he went to graduate school for social work. He had been accepted to both Michigan State University and Western Michigan University and was all set to go to M.S.U.—he already had an apartment and textbooks. But, Derek says, “I came and checked out Western again on a whim, and just fell in love with Kalamazoo. I felt more comfortable here than I did in East Lansing, so I changed my plans and came to Western.”

Derek graduated in 1999 with a Master of Social Work Administration degree. After getting his degree, he worked in a variety of jobs serving at-risk populations. For a while he worked on the East Coast, including a year-long stint as an outdoor-education instructor, taking tough, inner-city kids from New Jersey and New York backpacking.

He returned to Michigan and worked at several other camps and social services organizations. He was working as the Camp Director at Pretty Lake Vacation Camp when he and Adrienne met. Adrienne’s small boutique had been operating primarily as a consignment store for prom and pageant dresses. In 2004, the same year the couple became engaged, they moved Memories to a larger space in Stevensville, adding bridal wear to the inventory and selling only new merchandise.

The couple lived in St. Joseph, and Derek worked for the LINK Crisis Center in Benton Harbor, but he was slowly becoming more and more involved in Adrienne’s store. As it happened, running a business suited his passion for organizational leadership quite well. When they opened a second location, the Kalamazoo store, in late 2006, he left the field of social work—by now he was back at Pretty Lake serving as Interim Executive Director—to manage the administrative aspects of the business full-time.

“That was what I was good at; that was what I was interested in. Being a director of a nonprofit is kind of what I saw myself doing career-wise … I just transitioned into this role here, and it’s remarkably similar in a lot of ways. Managing a system is pretty much the same, whether it’s a for-profit or a nonprofit,” he says.

This viewpoint is not obvious to old friends who think it’s odd when they learn that Derek owns a dress shop. He says that while the enterprise is actually farther from his wife’s science background, “Adrienne, I think, gets away with it a little bit easier.” It took her parents a while to get used to the idea, but she also gets interesting reactions in the store for another reason—her age. Customers assume that Adrienne, now age 30, is a sales associate like the rest of the mostly college-age staff, and they’re shocked when they discover she’s the owner.

Coming to the formal-wear industry from such different professional backgrounds, the Wissners’ philosophy for their business is all about being unique. The store’s slogan is “Don’t Dress Like Her, Dress Like You.” As Adrienne explains it: “My big thing with the pageants is seeing girls take pride in themselves and their uniqueness and wanting to show that to the world.” She doesn’t think girls should have to dress a certain way to try to please the judges.

She says, “It’s our store’s philosophy, and mine personally, that you need to be the best you that you can be and be proud of who you are. And if you are a funky,
punk-rocker chick, then you show your funky, punk-rocker chick when you’re on stage, and you’re proud of that. And if they choose you for that, then fabulous; they saw the real you.”

Adrienne, who is responsible for all “front of the house” aspects of running Memories, including overseeing the sales staff and purchasing all inventory, makes sure the merchandise sets the store apart from chain stores. Her favorite part of the job is hand-selecting every dress she sells. She does all the buying herself, traveling to several dress shows a year. “We try to get things that are a little different, a little more unique,” she says.

Adrienne also makes sure to get dresses that are of high quality yet still affordable for people on a variety of budgets. About 15 to 20 name-brand designers are represented in Memories’ collection. “Prices are pretty comparable to the bigger-box stores,” she says. The average price of the wedding gowns they sell is $850, but some are available for as low as $450. Prom dresses range from $250 to $500.

“Our mission isn’t about selling dresses,” she says. “It’s about helping women feel really good about themselves … I think we need to do that, whether we get to sell a dress or not.”

In the spirit of being special and unique, Memories offers a service to prom-goers and area pageant participants to ensure no two girls end up at the same event in the same dress. They keep a registry, recording when a dress has been purchased for a specific event. They will not sell the same dress to someone else who is also attending that event.

Because Memories is all about special occasions, they want to provide a special shopping experience, too. Adrienne says, “We’re not a super high-end store; that’s sort of one of the myths out there. … We’re not a bargain-basement store (either), but we do have really competitive prices for the girls who are on a moderate budget.” However, they want the experience to feel upscale, she says. “So you can get a dress in your budget but still have that wonderful experience like you were shopping in a high-end boutique in downtown Chicago.”

The Wissners believe a large factor in the shopping experience is location, and the fact that Memories is downtown sets it apart from stores in suburban retail districts. Their commitment to this idea goes back to their store in downtown Stevensville, which they closed in 2009 to focus on a single location.

When Derek moved here to attend graduate school, he fell in love with downtown Kalamazoo, so when the couple was looking for a second location, it was pretty obvious where they wanted to be. They liked downtown’s vibe and
were seeing a resurgence of interest in downtowns, with more people wanting to come back into the city, particularly for specialty shops.

Achieving this unique shopping experience has entailed a lot of work and some sacrifice. In order to raise the capital needed to open the Kalamazoo store, Derek sold his beloved Harley Davidson NightTrain. “It was definitely not the most macho thing to do to sell your Harley Davidson to buy

ity—walk-ins are not an option.

The store solicits dress donations from community members and also contributes some of its inventory to the cause. Over the course of the year, Memories collects and stores the donations in a “Cinderella Room” in the basement and plans the logistics for the big day.

“We shut down the whole store for an entire day each spring and sort of transform the store into the Cinderella Boutique,” Adrienne says. The regular merchandise is stored away and the Cinderella dresses are brought out.

Each girl is assigned a “fairy godmother,” a Junior League member, to help her find the perfect dress and pamper her for the day.

“We give away dresses, accessories, pretty much anything that we can so that these girls can have this chance to experience this life event that all the other high school girls look forward to and remember long after,” Adrienne says.

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Adrienne and Derek are much more rugged in their personal life. Their honeymoon was a camping trip across the Upper Peninsula. They also enjoy canoeing, and Derek loves to haul in a lunker from the Pere Marquette River.

a bunch of wedding gowns, but it has all paid off,” he says.

When they found the building at 203 E. Michigan, they loved the location. Derek says, “As a destination store, it’s nice to be able to say we’re in the heart of downtown Kalamazoo.” The building had great potential, too, but it was in bad shape. It needed a Cinderella-like transformation, so the Wissners took on the role of fairy godmother.

They signed a lease with an option to purchase the building in the future and began rehabilitating the building’s interior, converting the second-story offices to additional retail space. They officially purchased the building in early 2009, and set about redoing the exterior. They spent last summer renovating the façade and back entryway, restoring the brick and cobblestone alley next to the building, and adding large windows on the second floor.

This last improvement was crucial. Derek and Adrienne have found that with 15,000 cars passing by on Michigan Avenue every day, their large, front-display windows are a major factor in attracting new customers, and because the store has second-floor retail space, they wanted to double that advertising capacity. Also, few people realized the store had retail space on the second floor.

Memories displays all its prom and pageant dresses, as well as dresses for bridesmaids and mothers-of-the-bride, on the ground floor, which also has a small area for men where tuxedos can be rented. A spacious room full of wedding gowns is upstairs.

Memories attracts business from the surrounding region, mostly through word-of-mouth and the Internet. It is not uncommon for brides to come from all over southern and western Michigan and even from as far away as Chicago and Detroit to shop, and Memories even outfits several Miss Michigan contestants each year. Now women who found their prom dresses there during the store’s early years are starting to come back for their bridal gowns.

Memories took first place in the Kalamazoo Gazette’s “Reader’s Choice Awards” in the categories of Kalamazoo’s Best Women’s Clothing Store and Best Boutique for both 2009 and 2010. They have also been recognized several times with various industry awards.

It’s a happy business to be in, and they receive a lot of thank-you notes from customers, but some heart-warming stories really stand out. Adrienne recalls a girl who came to shop for a dress two days before her prom. Having recently been in a near-fatal car accident, she was in a wheelchair and wearing a leg brace and neck brace. She had shopped everywhere and hadn’t been able to find a dress. “We were able to find her the perfect dress; she was so excited about it,” Adrienne says. “That was something really special that we felt really cool to be able to be a part of.”

The Wissners have been very pleased with the success of their business. The Kalamazoo store has been profitable from the beginning, and they almost doubled their five-year goal around year three, Derek says. Sales have gone up every year. They don’t know whether or not the economy has affected their business because “we don’t know what it would’ve been,” Derek says. They surmise that the special nature of their business is something that people don’t want to cut back on. “You might be tightening your belt in other areas, but Dad’s still going to buy that wedding dress,” says Derek.

Derek and Adrienne are grateful for the warm reception they’ve received from...
their customers as well as the downtown business community. They have high praise for the assistance they received from Downtown Kalamazoo Incorporated’s various programs (including the Interior Rehabilitation Program, Façade Design Assistance Program, and Façade Improvement Program), as well as from the Downtown Kalamazoo Retail and Restaurant Association (DKRRA), an organization with which they’ve been involved since the store opened in Kalamazoo.

The support and camaraderie of other business owners have been invaluable in getting the business off the ground. The DKRRA’s monthly educational roundtables have been very helpful. “We’re learning about different things that we don’t have backgrounds or formal educations in,” Derek says.

In return, they give back by being active in the downtown business community and volunteering with several charitable organizations. Adrienne is an active member of the Junior League of Kalamazoo and a board member of the Downtown Kalamazoo Charities Board. Derek is on the board of the Downtown Development Authority and a member of the Kalamazoo Rotary Club. He is also current board president of the DKRRA. Through the DKRRA, he is also a mentor to Ace’s Cycle, a downtown scooter shop that is the state’s first retail incubator business. In this program, new businesses receive subsidies for rent, and in exchange they must participate in training and be paired with a mentor.

Through volunteering and charity work, Derek and Adrienne enjoy being
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Wissners

able to connect with their former interests. Derek also says that Memories’ own Cinderella Project (see side bar), “echoes back to (my) social work roots.”

Getting Memories up and running so smoothly has been their life for most of the past five years, but Derek and Adrienne haven’t left their former lives behind. Adrienne says, “We’re not nearly as glamorous in our outside life as we are in the store. We’re pretty rough and tumble outside the store.”

They still love being outdoors and even spent their honeymoon camping across the Upper Peninsula. They also enjoy hiking and biking. Adrienne gets her plant fix at home with her perennial gardens and a large vegetable garden, and she also enjoys crafting and quilting. Though he is now without a motorcycle, Derek has already owned four bikes and expects he’ll get another one someday, although, he says, “My sports tend to become more and more cautious as I age.” He has recently taken up running and is currently training for this spring’s Kalamazoo marathon.

The Wissners love running Memories and have no plans to return to their former career paths. “We both are overachievers, so we always can see the potential and what we can be doing better. So it’s a constant work in progress for us, but we’re really passionate about it. We can’t imagine doing anything else. We especially can’t imagine working for anybody else ever again. We definitely got the entrepreneur bug,” says Adrienne. [89]

Derek has never lost his passion for riding a motorcycle, but he did have to sell his Harley Davidson to raise capital needed to start Memories.

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At the Latvian Embassy in Washington, D.C., in September–October 2010, Sniedze Rungis unveiled her latest creation, an exhibit of Nature photographs she calls Mekletajs/Explorer. In doing so, she fulfilled a kind directive from her dying mother to “seek out the stones, the ancient grandfather rocks.”

Born in a refugee camp in Germany in 1951, Sniedze has traveled to Latvia, where the ashes of her parents are now buried. In 2005 she followed her mother's words and captured the photos that are the essence of Mekletajs/Explorer.

“I found them; they are there. People talk about them, and some are marked on old maps,” Sniedze says of the stones. “These rocks have existed for millennia, and people tend them because they believe the stones speak to them. Even in the Soviet times, people did not break their connection with these rocks. They are sacred places of healing, prophecy, and ecstasy where reality shifts, and there's dialogue between people and Nature, like at Stonehenge or places the Native Americans revered. I experienced that ecstasy. Yes, of course.”

Sniedze was accompanied on her journey by long-time friend and mentor, Kalamazoo artist and printmaker Ladislav Hanka. Photographing Lad amongst the ancient rocks and verdant trees, Sniedze utilized his figure as the mekletajs, a shaman-like figure who draws attention to brilliant images of Nature. “First, he's not shown; he's looking through the lens, and that's when he begins to see,” she emphasizes. “We drove all over Latvia on dirt roads and back ways to the Russian border. There, he—the shaman—appears and the story begins.”

The exhibit captures 14 categories of Nature, such as Earth, Ether, Fire, Water, Wood, Stone, Peace, and War. “I covered the elements that concern our world,” Sniedze comments with a voice of primal feminine energy. The individual images are prints that Sniedz digitized, compiled into thematic composites, and printed on canvases that, collectively, measure 60 feet by 100 feet.

Sniedze's connection with her Latvian roots has enabled her to write poetry in her native language and have it published in her homeland. Though she hasn't written verse in English, she describes the goal of her photographic journey, her own mekletajs, in poetic terms: “to search for the wellspring of many memories, tales of guts and glory, stories of loss and redemption, hints at hidden secrets back in the homeland that my Latvian parents left me as a legacy.”

Sniedze has also grown roots here in Kalamazoo. “My family came here when I was a child. My vision of a bright, new future was formed on the playgrounds of McKinley Elementary, South Junior High, and old Kalamazoo Central,” she says.

Only a few credit hours short of earning an art degree from Western Michigan University in the early 1970s, she dropped out. “I decided I didn't want to be in those big buildings anymore; I just wanted to go out and see the world,” she explains.

She adds that this caused “great pain and consternation” for her parents. “They had everything material stripped away from them during the war. So, to them, the jewels we find in life are what we can take with us—like education, which they valued highly. The rest of it, at any minute, someone can come and take away. They always told me that.”

After her parents died in 2000 and 2001, Sniedze heeded their wisdom. “There's this phenomenon—my mother called it the closing of the door. They passed away, and I saw the door. That's what propelled me to return to school.”

The place of education was School of the Art Institute of Chicago from which she graduated in 2005. Along with her diploma, Sniedze received a fellowship grant for her journey to her ancestral land where she took the photos for the Mekletajs exhibit.

In addition, she works in other media: drama through The Whole Art Theatre, printmaking under the tutelage of Lad Hanka, and photography as an apprentice to Jim Riegel at the Kalamazoo Institute of Arts who, Sniedze says, lured her into Photoshop.

She also creates scroll books (used by Indian sages, princes, and princesses to write messages) and artists books—one-of-a-kind, leather-bound volumes filled with illustrations, artistically enhanced photographs, poetry, and stories.

One artist book she crafted is a biography of St. Elizabeth, a
Hungarian princess born in 1207. She married a German prince for political benefit of both families at the age of 14 and was canonized for her work among Germany's poor.

With this book in hand, Sniedze offers an example of what she calls an artist's prerogative “to destroy, to take apart something and reassemble it in an unfamiliar fashion.” She explains that a friend gave her a childhood photograph that Sniedze artistically modified and used in the book. “Obviously, in the 1200s, there wouldn't be a photograph of St. Elizabeth,” she says, “but in one of my friend's photos, she had this imp-like expression and was wearing a little crown. This became my medieval portrait of St. Elizabeth.”

This image fits, Sniedze says, “because St. Elizabeth was ‘the impossible aristocrat.’ She worked alone amongst the poor when it was forbidden for wealthy women to leave the castle without a retinue.”

Sniedze has also included Buddhist teachings, text from the Essenes Gospel of Peace, and writings from various Christian denominations. With utter simplicity accented by dramatic inflection, she states, “Why not deconstruct and reassemble in this manner? Why can’t I use sacred text, available to us now, to describe this saint from back then?”

In ironic contrast, Sniedze's studio contains pieces of wood—branches, tumorped trunks, and entangled root formations—that most people would easily allow to decompose in a forest or consume for campfires. “These are naturally occurring altars,” she explains of the pieces. She plans to transform—destroy and reassemble—them into wooden sculptures of wavy, meandering shapes that depict humanity’s ultimate roots with what Sniedze calls “dakini, Nature's spirits, Nature's forces.”

(far left) In September 2010 the Latvian Embassy in Washington, D.C., offered an exhibit of Rungis’ photographs, called “Explorer/Mekletajs.” The exhibit was a collection of photos of the large network of sacred sites that criss-cross Latvia. This photo shows a portion of that exhibit.

(left) Sniedze Rungis stands in her studio amidst several pieces of trunk branches, and roots that she will use in an upcoming sculpture project. She refers to these organic formations as “naturally occurring altars.”
PUSHKIN, a sister city of Kalamazoo, celebrated its 300th anniversary in June 2010 with a festival, carnival, parade, fireworks that were barely visible in mid-summer’s White Night, and a solemn consecration of the community’s cherished cathedral. The denizens were joined by dozens of international guests who rejoiced with them.

Pushkin became a village in 1710, two years after Tsar Peter the Great gave the land to his wife Catherine I. Located 15 miles from St. Petersburg, which was then the Russian capital, the site became known as Tsarskoye Selo (Tsar’s Village). During the Communist Era, it was renamed Detskoie Selo (Children’s Village). Then, in 1937, Pushkin assumed its current name in concurrence with the 100th anniversary of the death of Russian poet Alexander Pushkin (1799–1837), who studied there in 1811.

During World War II, Catherine Palace and Alexander Palace, which were built by the royal family in the 1700s, were severely damaged but have since been restored to their original opulence and are open to the public. Similarly, St. Catherine Cathedral, a majestic five-domed Russian Orthodox edifice located in the village center, was rededicated in a solemn ceremony on Sunday, June 27, 2010, the last day of the Pushkin celebration.

Victor Afanasenko, director of the Pushkin Chamber of Commerce and Industry, explained that the cathedral was originally consecrated in 1840 and then demolished 100 years later by the Bolsheviks, who replaced it with a larger-than-life statue of Russian leader Vladimir Lenin. He added, “The statue mysteriously tumbled one night” in 2004, even though it weighed several tons and was located near the police station. Reconstruction of the cathedral began two years later.

A few hundred people were allowed inside for the six-hour rededication while thousands stood outside and countless others watched on television. Kalamazooan Garrylee McCormick was, very likely, the only American inside, an honor he attained by carrying to Pushkin three relics—a slice from the True Cross, a piece of the Blessed Virgin’s...
veil, and a first-class relic (a bone particle) of St. Catherine, all gifts from the Sisters of Saint Joseph and a former chaplain at Nazareth.

These reconstructions of local and national treasures were a tremendous source of pride for Pushkinites, including Larisa Boeva and her son, Slava, who took me into their home for eight days.

Larisa is an art teacher at a school for children with breathing disorders. She is also an accomplished artist and member of the Society of Pushkin Artists, which has links to Galesburg resident Jerolyn Selkirk, who was my entrée into the Boeva home.

Slava took me on a six-hour trek of the expansive Catherine Garden that surrounds Catherine Palace and Alexander Palace. Of his knowledge of local lore, he simply stated, “My mother and I walked here for as long as I can remember.” Now at age 22 and having studied English in school, he patiently translated for Larisa and me as we shared stories and philosophies.

Twenty delegates of the Kalamazoo-Pushkin Partnership were on hand for the anniversary. Marie Stoline had recently written and published a book about residents of a home for retired architects; she and her husband, Michael, delivered copies. Paul Asmus, traveling with his wife, Alice, donned a fake, black beard and stovepipe hat to personify Abraham Lincoln. Jerolyn Selkirk and Betty Lee Ongley each took one of their college-age grandchildren. Frank Jamison, assisted by his wife, Paula, videographed the entourage and has since created a documentary.

In Pushkin, one of Larisa’s colleagues, Margarita Davuda, hosted a dinner party, and while dancing about her kitchen, she outfitted me with an apron and announced that we were making dumplings.

Later, in Saint Petersburg, Alesya Veter, a guide at a local sailing center whom I met a month
earlier in coastal Bulgaria, greeted me at the customs gate when I arrived by cargo ship from Germany. He provided a tour of plazas and cathedrals. Sociology professor Dr. Leo Semashko, a client whose English writing I edit, hosted me for two days, including a celebration of his birthday. And Maria Gu, whom I met at the festival, served dinner in her flat.

In Moscow, Marina Ilynikh, a Muscovite who spoke impeccable English and whom I met in Barcelona seven weeks earlier, provided a grand tour. An engineer by profession, Marina calibrated our 14-hour day to include historical highlights, a therapeutic massage, and a side trip on the Metro to where I would catch a commuter train to Sheremetyevo Airport the next day.

Inside the Red Square Metro station, I noticed many people touching certain parts of bronze sculptures that typify proletariat workers, farmers, athletes, soldiers, schoolchildren, and others. Marina explained that a few years ago college students began to touch the sculptures as a prank. Today, people of all ages continue the practice—for good luck. The result is that some parts, such as dogs’ muzzles, are now hand-polished to lustrous brilliance.

Near Red Square, the colorful Intercession Cathedral (also known as St. Basil’s) is a religious anomaly. Built in the mid-1500s, it was not destroyed during the Communist Era. “It was planned to be blown up—after all, it was a church in Red Square—but for some reason it wasn’t,” Marina said.

She related that Red Square was originally a market and noted an expensive department store nearby, but she expained that it has also been a military parade ground and a venue for major music concerts.

We strolled past Lenin’s tomb, choosing not to wait in a long line there, but we did pause to observe sentries and an eternal flame at a World War II memorial.

Marina pointed to the Moskva (Moscow) Hotel and asked if I saw anything peculiar about it. Yes, I said, the left wing comes forward while the right wing is flush with the center façade—and the windows are different from left to right. She explained that when the architect presented two sets of plans to Joseph Stalin, the Russian leader stamped his approval partly on both sets. Afraid to question, the architect built half of the building according to one set of plans and half according to the other. “Stalin was crazy. People were afraid of him,” Marina said.

Inside the Kremlin, Russia’s seat of government, we found ornate office buildings, cannonry, suited politicians, and uniformed soldiers of various ranks—and two churches and four cathedrals. Each was brilliantly topped with gold domes and crucifixes, and the interiors were rich with religious icons.

At the Temple to Christ the Savior, the world’s tallest Russian Orthodox cathedral, Marina stated, “Throughout our history, when we conquered a country in battle, we built a church. This one was to honor the victory of Tsar Alexander I over Napoleon in 1812.”
said the architects and builders couldn’t find a site with solid footing, so they moved a pre-existing monastery. When a worker fell and died, a nun cast a dubious curse on the building.

Completed in 1860, it was dynamited in 1931 by the Communists who intended to replace it with the Palace of the Soviets. But World War II and flooding of the nearby Moskva River prevented that project, so Nikita Khrushchev built, instead, the Moskva Pool, the world’s largest outdoor swimming pool. In 1990, the Russian Orthodox Church received permission to rebuild the temple according to its original design, and it was completed in 2000.

On a riverboat cruise on the Moskva River, we floated past a 300-foot sculpture that features a large, male figure in olden garb standing on the deck of an ancient sailing ship. Unveiled in 1997 by painter, sculptor, and architect Zurab Tsereteli, it has since been listed among the world’s ugliest artistic creations. Marina said that Tsereteli crafted the sculpture with the likeness of Christopher Columbus and attempted to give it to New York City. When the United States refused, he reshaped the head to that of Peter the Great.

Ten minutes downstream, we came upon a building, constructed in Russian Baroque and Gothic styles, that resembled a cathedral yet, because of its numerous rectangular windows, clearly was not. At the lower levels, its expansive wings looked like shoulders and arms that might encircle a courtyard. In the center, its tiers ascended to a multi-faceted pinnacle about 30 stories tall. A 30-foot bronze sculpture at the base of the steeple depicted a proletariat couple holding a banner that bore the Russian hammer and sickle. And the spire, more than 100 feet tall, was crowned by the communist star and wreath of wheat insignia. With a smooth, sandstone façade and numerous spires, it portrayed practicality and prestige.
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Marina said this was a residential building with 540 flats. Completed in 1952, it’s one of seven similar Moscow structures nicknamed “Stalin’s High-Rises” by Muscovites and “Seven Sisters” by others. Under the Communist regime, flats were given to workers for their service to the state. With Russia’s current economy, however, many are occupied by children of the original recipients, often shared with siblings and their families. “People don’t make enough money to buy a home, and even if mortgages are available, interest rates are 20 to 25 percent,” Marina said.

Marina’s special gift on this day was a visit to a museum that honors the writings and paintings of Nicholas Roerich, who had traveled extensively in southern Russia, India, and China in the 1920s and 1930s. In particular, she wanted me to see a painting of a Himalayan stupa painted in rich blues and blacks as though lit by a full moon. The painting is called “Crossroads of Christ and Buddha,” a title that expresses the belief that Jesus traveled the Silk Road during his “lost years” from ages 12 to 30.

Knowing that I would be in India among sacred places such as this on the next part of my journey, Marina stated, “Maybe their spirits will guide you.” I replied that I was already being guided and blessed by many generous Russians who invited me into their homes, welcomed me to their celebrations, and opened their hearts to share their culture and communities.

Red Square in Moscow was originally created to be a market in the center of the city. Located near the Kreml, it has been a military parade ground and, in recent years, the site of major musical events, including a performance by Paul McCartney. As a Beatle in the 1960s, he was barred from performing in Russia.
Sweetness of Freedom — Martha Aladjem Bloomfield and Steve Ostrander will discuss their book, “Sweetness of Freedom,” an eclectic grouping of immigrants’ narratives and the personal artifacts, historical documents, and photographs they brought to Michigan. Apr. 27, 7–8:30 p.m. Central Library.

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Open for Discussion — Come to discuss “The Lemon Tree: An Arab, a Jew, and the Heart of the Middle East” by Sandy Tolan. Apr. 12, 7–8 p.m.

Community Literary Awards — Jamie Gordon will be featured speaker at this ceremony honoring winners of this year’s competition. Apr. 13, 7–8:30 p.m.

Poetry Reading — Nancy Eimers & Bill Olsen will read from their new poetry collections. Apr. 27, 6:30–8 p.m.

Miscellaneous

Poets in Print — The Kalamazoo Book Arts Center presents this series of poetry readings at which limited-edition broadsides made by KBAC in collaboration with the poet will be available. Nick Demske and Anne Shaw, April 16, 7 p.m. KBAC, 326 W. Kalamazoo Ave., Ste. 103A.

Gwen Frostic Reading Series — Renowned writers read from their works. Jerome Rothenberg, poet, translator and anthologist. April 7, 7 p.m. Stetson Chapel, K-College.

Kalamazoo Valley Museum
373-7990

Playing with Time — This exhibit takes visitors on a journey to the unseen world of natural change and shows events that happen too fast or too slow for humans to perceive. Through May 30.
Male Chorus
(Continued from page 21)

The Kalamazoo Ringers joined with the Kalamazoo Male Chorus to present a Christmas Concert in December 2010.

and flute, had a chorus part, and was an understudy in “Cabaret” on Broadway. He took the male lead as Cliff Bradshaw when that musical played at The North Carolina Theatre in 2005.

Brian came to Kalamazoo in 2008 with his wife, Emily, who is Director of Arts Management at WMU. Since arriving, he has become vice president of the Kalamazoo Male Chorus, performed improv comedy with Crawlspace Eviction, and worked with Farmers Alley Theatre. He gives voice lessons, enjoys being a stay-at-home dad with his and Emily’s two sons, and continues to go on location with ESPN to set lights at major sporting events.

With his Broadway experience, Brian has performed many solos for the Kalamazoo Male Chorus, enlivened shows with choreography, and is a lead tenor. “This year,” he says, “we started an ensemble that learns material ahead of the others. This helps the entire Chorus learn complicated numbers faster, which is important because we’ve added more concerts.”

In the past, the Kalamazoo Male Chorus has performed two or four concerts each year. By the end of the 2010–2011 season, they will have presented eight, plus private shows in hospitals and retirement communities.

Many of their public events are collaborations with other musical groups. Their Christmas in Kalamazoo concert at First Presbyterian Church also featured the Kalamazoo Ringers and Kalamazoo Brass. Their Valentine’s event at the Kalamazoo Country Club was in collaboration with Duffield/Caron Project, a blues duo comprised of local jazz keyboardist Tom Duffield and WMUK personality Lorraine Caron, and local magician Morgan Hause.

Their next performance will be April 10 in collaboration with the Kalamazoo Community Chorale under the direction of Heidi Pelkey, the choral music director at Comstock High School. The Chorale is an all women’s chorus. Each group will perform four pieces and then combine for another four.

“The beauty of this collaboration,” says Michael Palmer, “is that the combined voices will number approximately 100. Because each ensemble is capable of performing multi-part harmony, we have programmed repertoire that allows us to explore the richness of that sound. An example is “Gloria Fanfare,” by Jeffrey James, a piece that calls for a 12-part choir accompanied by brass and piano.”

The final concert of the season will be the annual “Big Sing” on May 7, which features 250 men in 10 male choruses from Michigan, Indiana, and Ohio. Hosted by the Great Lakes Male Chorus Association, that performance will be in Midland on May 7.

New singers are always welcome to join the Kalamazoo Male Chorus. As their Eeb site professes—and as is exhibited by the men themselves—“No one shall remain a stranger among friends.”

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We’d love to share your poetry with Kalamazoo-area readers. Please submit a short personal profile to accompany it.

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