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Community members concerned about the well-being of the beloved Henry Boys

by Sara Sedlacek · February 11, 2009

Though there were several empty pews at Zion Lutheran Church in Atalissa last Sunday, two pews in particular felt especially vacant. Pastor Lynn Thiede made note of the empty pews, pointing to them with her right hand while covering her face with a program to shield her congregation from the tears beginning to flow down her cheeks.

“Wow, I’m going to miss those boys,” she said in a strained voice. “We just want to know they’re safe. God bless them.”

It took very little to urge the congregation to follow her downstairs to share stories about the “boys” who had made their home at Zion Lutheran Church for more than 30 years. The small congregation gathered around with coffee and chocolate cake and slowly began to recall their memories of the Henry Boys.

The Henry Boys aren’t really boys. In fact, they’re all grown men reaching retirement age. More than 30 years ago, the men were brought from Texas to Atalissa by Henry’s Turkey Service to work at West Liberty Foods. The 21 men worked at the plant cleaning and gutting turkeys. They lived in the old schoolhouse on top of the hill on the outskirts of Atalissa. The schoolhouse is painted a gaudy bright blue but not by accident. The boys chose that color and were proud of it.

Last Friday, Feb. 6, the schoolhouse on the hill received some unexpected visitors, turning the Henry Boys’ world upside down. Police, health inspectors and social workers from county, state and federal agencies paid a visit to the schoolhouse, beginning an investigation into the care and treatment of the Boys, who are all developmentally challenged. After a weekend of utter chaos, the Boys were taken away early Sunday morning.

Pastor Thiede and the congregation of Zion Lutheran Church expected the Boys to come to Sunday School last weekend. The Boys have their own, private class and, for perhaps the first time in 30 years, the Boys didn’t show for their 9:30 lesson.

Gary and Kirsten Holmquist are the Boys’ Sunday School teachers. They took over the class from Dorothy Garvin who passed away last year. Garvin had taught the Boys since they first arrived in Atalissa three decades ago.

“They were all individuals,” Gary Holmquist said of the Boys. “They were all unique and there was always acceptance. Acceptance for who they are and acceptance for who we are.”

Gary Holmquist remembered each of the men and their special talents, abilities or quirks.

“Levi was the singer,” he said. “He grew up with a gospel tradition. The pastors taught him different songs but he would always make up his own songs. He had a voice like Tom Waits and a real rhythm talent. He brought that gift to us. He’d make up a song and every time he’d say, ‘This song is for you.’”

Though the songs were often the same, just with someone else’s name inserted in the lyrics, everyone appreciated Levi’s songs and the heart he put into them. Levi was often seen with a tambourine or other musical instruments.

“Preston was the puzzle-maker,” Gary Holmquist continued. “He could read and he loved doing word puzzles.”

Thiede said, though the men were all special in their own way, one of the men was more dear to her than the others.

“It’s Tommy I’m missing most of all,” she said, once again fighting back tears. “Tommy left right before Christmas. Tommy was a big bear of a guy. He didn’t speak well but every Sunday - rain, sleet, snow or slush - he would be waiting for me

outside the church. He insisted on carrying everything inside for me and then he would dress me. He put my robes on me. He couldn't vocally speak but in his actions he spoke volumes. Tommy was very upset about leaving."

Thiede explained Levi wasn't the only one who enjoyed music.

"One of the pastors in years past taught them to hum. They hummed the prayers," she said. "They gave their offering of music and they always held the Hymnals even though they couldn't read them."

It wasn't difficult to remember each of the Henry Boys. Each member of the congregation had a different story about the men.

John rode his bike around town and picked up trash for years until his bike was stolen. The missing bike only slowed him down for a bit, though. He still made sure the town was spic and span before the Atalissa Day Parade.

"Raymond likes to color in pencil," said Gary Holmquist. "He also liked to have an extra coffee to take with him. Last night he wanted to be a fireman."

The night before the men were taken away by the Iowa Department of Human Services, they attended the Atalissa Firemen's Soup Supper. They never missed it. Or any other community event, for that matter.

"They were part of the community. They had purpose here," said Thiede.

Others echoed Thiede. The men were never a problem in the community and were always welcome. They were the first to greet newcomers and they were always friendly and polite.

"When they told you, 'I prayed for you,' you knew darned well they did," said Thiede. "With a developmentally challenged child of my own, I can relate to these men."

Birthdays were very important to the men. They always made sure people knew when their birthday was. According to the congregation, the men also loved the Christmas pageant, which they insisted on doing every year. Until 10 years ago, the men hosted a Christmas party at the schoolhouse. The entire community was invited. The men were very proud of their rooms and were excited to show them off to their friends in the community.

"The guys were happy. They never complained," Thiede said.

The community was shocked to find out the conditions in which the men were living were not what they once were. The schoolhouse was their home for 30 years, nonetheless, which has lead many Atalissa residents to be concerned for what awaits the men once they leave.

"They might not know what they're going home to. That's what's so heartbreaking," said Thiede. "We just want to know they're okay. We'd like to know they're going somewhere better."

According to several Atalissa residents, the men were promised a "ranch" when they returned to Texas after they retired. Though retirement would have come next month, Thiede said there is no ranch in Texas for the men to go.

Regenia Arrowood from the Atalissa Post Office had a good relationship with the men, even though she doesn't live in Atalissa. She, too, is concerned for the welfare of the men.

"We're all in the dark," she said. "I've seen how supportive Atalissa has been to these men. They're part of Atalissa. The people here embraced them. It's upsetting. You never want to think anything bad could happen to them, but we don't really know."

Vada Baker is with the Atalissa Betterment Committee. She knows the men well and said she can't imagine Atalissa without them.

"Jeff taught me how to do the two-step," she said. "They used to bring the boys down to the bars on Friday nights to dance when there was a band. If you danced with one, you danced with them all."

Baker said she even hired the men to do odd jobs around her house.

"They were all very polite. They loved to get hugs," she said. "It's too bad. They were good for the community. They were

like our family. I feel bad, personally. I assumed the building was being taken care of and they were getting the proper medical attention. They were always smiling, always happy. Maybe that's just how they were programmed."

Drew and Randy Neubauer new the men the best. The couple has been caring for the men for 15 years.

"I bought their food and clothes. Took them to the doctor, to the movies, the races, the dances," said Drew Neubauer. "They're fantastic boys. They all have big hearts."

The Neubauers went with the men when they were taken to Muscatine Sunday. Drew sobbed when she returned from Waterloo, where the men will remain until custody is determined. Since the men are developmentally handicapped, they have been declared dependent adults and will need to live in a supervised care facility.

"They're doing fine," Drew Neubauer said. "They're being well cared for. They think they're on a big adventure. They're a little scared, but so are we. They're like our kids. We wouldn't hurt them for the world."

The investigation of Henry's Turkey Service will include close examination of financial records to determine how the men were paid and to insure Henry's Turkey Service paid unemployment taxes and social security, among other things.

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