

## Restoration of Jackson Street Takes on Religious Fervor



Doug Preston stands in his makeshift chapel at Jackson Street Hall that serves to revive him when he is discouraged.

By Matthew Gryczan

To call it a miracle would be cliché.

But it would be apt to say that the reconstruction now taking place at Jackson Street Hall on the west side of Grand Rapids is nearly miraculous.

In a little less than six months, the drive to restore what claims to be the oldest Polish hall operating in the United States has gone from chaos and disarray into a juggernaut

that has little chance of failing.

In August, President Anna Tylzinski was publicly pleading for help to save the hall built by the Polish National Aid Society (PNAS) in 1888 that had fallen on terribly hard times. There wasn't enough cash to buy food and beverages for the upcoming Pulaski Days celebration, let alone money to repair the roof or rusted doors. The society was racked by internal dissension between the new administration and the prior one that

left 31 cents in its coffers.

But by early March, the club had amassed well over \$600,000 for its restoration project in the form of cash, building materials, services and labor. Membership has more than doubled to nearly 300. The outside of the 7,800-square-foot hall has been stripped of its old siding in preparation of new, and work crews have installed new LED lighting and replaced a hot water heater and three aging furnaces with a new high efficiency furnace. Old bathrooms have been gutted down to the joists for renovation, and a new roof is expected to be installed this spring.

Those closely involved with the project say it's due to the vision of Doug Preston and his wife and high school sweetheart Lucy Maciejewski Preston.

In the case of Doug Preston, that vision has taken on a religious fervor -- literally.

"It all started when Lucy was

named the Busia Queen at the (Dozynki) Polish festival in August," Preston said. "Anna (Tylzinski) went on the news that weekend pleading for donations, and Lucy told me: 'My mission as Busia Queen is to help Jackson Street Hall.'

"I said that I was with her one hundred percent. But when we drove up to the hall and I had a good look at it, I thought to myself: 'What did I get myself into?' It looked like a bomb went off from the outside."

Walking through the doors helped to calm some of Preston's fears. While the interior needed new lighting, club members had spruced things up a bit with freshly painted walls. Bartender Rene TenEyck sealed the deal. "She is wonderful: Talks to everyone like she has known them forever," Preston said.

It was during a September PNAS meeting when Preston learned how far the society had fallen in debt. The club's treasurer reported that the hall was about \$5,000 in the red, and it would need additional money to purchase *(Continued on Page 2)*

### Jackson: First or Oldest?

By Matthew Gryczan

Research indicates that Jackson Street Hall is not the first Polish hall to be erected in the United States, but it has a strong claim to being the oldest Polish hall operating today at its original location.

An article that appeared in the Grand Rapids Evening Press in February 1899 quotes Roman Kuchainski as stating the PNAS was "the first in this country to erect a hall," but newspaper reports prior to 1888 describe Polish halls in San Antonio, Texas, Bay View, Wis. and St. Paul, *(Continued on page 2)*

**Polish Heritage Society  
of Grand Rapids  
PO Box 1844  
Grand Rapids MI  
49501-1844**

<https://polishheritagesociety.com>

Email us at [phsgrandrapids@gmail.com](mailto:phsgrandrapids@gmail.com).

The Polish Heritage Society of Grand Rapids promotes Polish/Lithuanian culture in the metro Grand Rapids. The Society meets on the 3rd Monday of every month except for December and general meetings in June and October. The society publishes this newsletter monthly. We invite story ideas and content contributions. For more information, please contact Matthew Gryczan, Richard Panek or Marilyn Lignell by writing to [phsgrandrapids@gmail.com](mailto:phsgrandrapids@gmail.com).

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food and beverages for the October celebration of Pulaski Days -- by far the largest mon-eymaker of the year.

"The members were all wondering what they would do," Preston said. "Anna told them that we had to pull ourselves up by our bootstraps because Pulaski Days was coming. My heart just sank listening to all of this."

During the time for public comment, Preston announced that he would pay the \$5,000 debt, in memory of his mother Patricia Alber and his father Sarge Preston. "My mom had recently passed away and left all of us kids some money," he said. "Even though she was from Irish descent, she was really involved in the Polish community."

Preston said he had trouble sleeping that evening after the meeting, as he was so overwhelmed with the "great feeling I had in helping them out.

"When I can't sleep, I usually pray, and while I was praying the rosary, I had a vision of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. He said he was pleased. He said: 'Whatsoever you do to the least of my brothers, you do onto me.'"

More donations from Doug and Lucy Preston followed -- \$5,000 to pay for food and beverages for Pulaski Days, \$13,500 for the furnace in the name of Doug's parents, \$3,500 for a new water heater in the name of Lucy's parents, Bob and Lucille Maciejewski. The Prestons stand as the largest donor to the Jackson Street Hall restoration.

Through his connections, Preston began to leverage his own donations. Contract Electric Inc., founded by Sarge Preston



**Hall president Anna Tylzynski shows off the space that is being renovated for gently used children's clothing and household necessities as way for the hall to serve the community.**

in 1958 and now owned by Doug and brothers Russ, Greg and Bryan, has contributed more than \$30,000 in electrical upgrades throughout the building. Kevin Wood and his stepsons K.C. and Jarred Pope at Customer Comfort Heating and Cooling Inc. in Sparta installed the furnace at no cost. Todd Baker at Carter Lumber gave steep discounts on windows and building materials.

Members of the club used their connections as well. Walsh Construction Co. Inc. in Grand Rapids donated dumpsters and use of a crane when employee and society member Ron Larson promoted the project. Ron's wife Dianna has given hours of free cleaning time to the restoration. Mike Walberer at B.A.P.I. in Grand Rapids donated *(Continued on Page 3)*

## First or Oldest?

*(continued from Page 1)* Minn. Newspaper reports from the early 1890s also reference Polish halls in Chicago and Pittsburgh that could have been built before 1888.

Various sources do not show evidence of Polish halls from that time period operating today in San Antonio, Bay View, St. Paul, Chicago and Pittsburgh.

Office staff of Saint Michael's church in San Antonio said that there isn't a Saint Alberts hall in the city, a hall that was referenced in a newspaper story as

connected with the parish. Local history buffs in Bay View confirm there isn't a Polish hall in that city. Internet searches of St. Paul, Chicago and Pittsburgh do not show Polish halls operating in the locations referenced in the news stories.

Lucja Mirowska-Kopec, president of the Alliance of Polish Clubs in the U.S.A., said she was not aware of an existing hall built before 1888, and the oldest hall of her organization representing about 30 Polish halls in the Chicago metropolitan area was established in 1902.

foam insulation. Patrick M. Brechting at Create Architecture in Grand Rapids, surveyor Brad Meyer, drone pilot Ed Macklin III and professional engineers Michael J. Wysocki and his son Aiden donated professional services.

Bob Baker, corporate regional sales manager for Eikenhout Inc. in Grand Rapids, said it was “our honor” to donate roofing shingles, siding and other building materials to the project because the company has a long history of involvement in the local community and worthy causes.

“Since we are celebrating our 130th anniversary as a company this year, we thought it was only fitting that we support the restoration of Jackson Street Hall that’s over 130 years old,” Baker said. “That kind of commitment is just part of our corporate culture.”

Established in 1894 by Hendrick Eikenhout, the company is an independent building materials distributor with locations in Grand Rapids, Muskegon, Holland, Kalamazoo, Traverse City, Petoskey, Lansing, Mt. Pleasant, Gaylord, and Saginaw.

Baker said his company became aware of the project through local media reports and discussions with a long-time customer, VanderLaan Home Improvement based in Hudsonville, with offices in Traverse City.

Joe Haught, office manager at VanderLaan, said his company received the contract to supply labor for decking, roofing and siding for the remodel. He became aware of the project through his participation in Grand Rapids Dart League, which has approved Jackson Street Hall as one of its loca-

tions for competition.

“The things that are happening there with the restoration are phenomenal,” Haught said. “The guys on my team and other teams are really excited with the changes at the hall.”

Meijer Inc. donated \$5,000 on behalf of the employees of its Standale store under the Meijer Team Gives program last year, said Kaitlin Milke, president of the Pulaski Days Committee Inc. Under the program, employees of individual stores identify the local nonprofits meaningful to them and the communities that they serve. Since inception in 2021, the company has donated more than \$10 million over its six-state footprint under the Meijer Team Gives program.

Milke said she applied for a grant under the program and was told that “the employees almost voted unanimously to fund the project.”

The Pulaski Days Committee itself contributed \$6,000 to the Jackson Street Hall for operational costs prior to Pulaski Days so that the hall would not miss its largest fundraiser for the year.

Mike Kozal, PHS board member and head of the society’s fundraising committee, said that as of the end of February, cash donations to the effort were \$110,900, building materials donated by local companies amounted to \$194,000, and labor hours amounted to an estimated \$310,000. He added that about \$34,500 has been contributed in incidentals such as survey and engineering work, drone services, dumpsters, crane rentals and food for workers and the club’s Lenten fish fries.

“There’s a whole new vibe around here,” said Kozal, who worked with Tylzynski on revis-

ing the bylaws of the organization and setting expectations for proper behavior at Jackson Street. “Members are taking a stake in the building -- they have their chests puffed out a bit with pride.”

He said there was some dissent in the ranks of the members last fall, but that has subsided as the restoration project moved forward.

Formerly the vice president of engineering at Pridgeon & Clay in Grand Rapids, Kozal said the hall is being run now on a much more businesslike basis so that it will prosper after the renovation is completed. He noted that membership has swelled from about 140 last year to nearly 300 now.

Tylzynski is optimistic that the hall will still be operating in the next century. She said there is a new spirit of cooperation and volunteerism as evidenced by various activities such as the Lenten fish fries. The line of people waiting to enter the hall was so long at the March 1 dinner that the doors had to open before the 4:30 start time. It was sold out by 6:30 p.m.

But she added that the real difference is a renewed commitment to the club’s original purpose: serving the community.

A room above the first floor is being reworked into an area that will store “household necessities and gently used children’s clothing: things that people need,” she said. While the hall doesn’t have a formal relationship with a Catholic parish, it most likely will help families who send their children to nearby Sibley Elementary School.

“The original founders built this hall on faith and prayer,” Tylzynski said. “They could not have done it without them.”

That resonates strongly with Preston.

Aware that the ambitious project often depends on volunteers, Preston said he occasionally feels discouraged when there is a call for help and few show up.

“I go to work in the morning and get my crews off, and then the afternoons are down at the hall, working on something,” he said. “You put the word out there, and sometimes people will show up to help you, and sometimes you are on your own.”

When he feels down, Preston takes refuge in a space he carved out at the rear of the building that serves as a sort of chapel.

The space originally wasn’t accessible, just an abandoned room that was full of trash and enough raccoon feces to fill a 5-gallon bucket. “I think I got an infection clearing out the raccoon stuff,” Preston said.

He tore off the wallboard and replaced it with wood from 40 pallets at his business, along the way installing an American flag cross and large wooden rosary on the walls and a religious mural on the ceiling. “When I get down or I am feeling sorry for myself, I walk into that room and say: ‘Thank you Lord for what you have done for me.’”

Regardless of the hurdles ahead, Preston doesn’t waiver about the hall’s new commitment to serve the needy.

“Somewhere along the line they dropped the ball, and they stopped serving the community,” he said. “I know I have to finish this project because the main thing is, he (Jesus) wants this hall to go back to its original purpose.”



# PHS Member News

By newsletter staff

It is with great sadness that we extend our condolences to the families of longtime PHS members Marilyn and Dan Lignell and Bernice Zeman.

Marilyn and Dan's daughter, Carly Kristen Lignell, passed away unexpectedly on Feb. 22. at the age of 35, and funeral services were held for her on March 2 at Faith Lutheran Church in Grand Rapids, where Carly's grandfather served as pastor for many years.



**Carly Lignell**

She leaves behind her beautiful and spirited daughter, Evelyn June Lignell-Dick -- the love of her life and favorite playmate.

Dan and Marilyn said that her brother Kevin and his wife Senait and special friend, Jeff Phillips, all offered tremendous support for Carly when she needed it. The Lignells described Carly as a child of God with a loving heart and a quiet gentle nature. Her smile would light up a room, and her laughter was a joy to hear, they said, and her clever wit was a testament to her intellect and gifted way with words.

Carly is survived by two

grandmothers and many aunts, uncles, and cousins whom she adored and was also adored by them. In lieu of flowers, memorials may be sent to Guiding Light Recovery 255 Division Ave S Grand Rapids, MI 49503. <https://guidinglightworks.org/give/> in memory of Carly Lignell.

Two days after Carly's funeral service, Marilyn and Dan Lignell attended funeral services for Dan's mother, Gerry Lignell, who passed away on Feb. 26 at the age of 97. Dan said that his mother did not fear death, but looked forward to joyous reunion with her best friend and husband, Robert, who prepared a path to heaven for her to follow.

Gerry helped her husband build and maintain Faith Lutheran Church and sang duets with him all over town. She leaves behind their four children: Kris Lignell, Pat ( Don) Missad, Dan (Marilyn) Lignell and Dave (Colleen) Lignell; 7 grandchildren, and 7 great grandchildren. Gerry served on the Board of Mental Health, was co chairwoman of the Mother's March of Dimes and volunteered for almost 40 years for the Mollie Booth Guild of Butterworth Hospital. In lieu of flowers memorials may be given to Faith Lutheran Church.

Longtime PHS supporter Bernice Zeman passed away on Feb. 16 at the age of 93. Bernice and her husband Henry were named 2008 Polish Citizens of the Year during that year's Dozynki Festival, and Bernice was known to many for her work as the full-time secretary of Holy Spirit Elementary School for 29 years.

She was preceded in death her parents, Felix and Katherine

Styburski, her husband, and her

cousins, and friends.



**Bernice Zeman**

daughter, Theresa.

Bernice is survived by her sons: James (Janel) and children Lauren and Jarrett; William (Dianne) and children Christina and Andy; Paul (Marie) and children Jacquelyn, Daniel, and Samantha; her sister, Dorothy Sessions; brothers, Harry Styburski, and Thomas Styburski; sister-in-law, Helen Emelander, along with nieces, nephews,

Bernice worked for several school principals during her years at Holy Spirit, earning the recognition that Bernice "really ran the place." She was a member of the Holy Spirit Altar Society and the Holy Spirit funeral luncheon committee. Memorial contributions may be made to Emmanuel Hospice 401 Hall St SW, Suite 263 Grand Rapids, MI 49503 or Holy Spirit Educational Foundation, 2230 Lake Michigan Dr. NW, Grand Rapids, MI 49504.

In other news, the Malbork Dance Group will be holding its seventh annual recital at 2 p.m. March 23 at West Catholic High School, 1801 Bristol Ave. NW. Admission to the recital is \$5 cash. In addition to the recital, the dance group will be holding an authentic Polish dinner catered by Busia's Catering at a cost of \$16 per plate. Dinner orders are due to the malborkdancegroup@gmail.com by March 14.

## Churches Holding Swieconka

In past years, the following churches have celebrated the tradition of Swieconka, the blessing of food nestled in Easter baskets.

The Polish tradition dates back to at least the 12th century.

Please check with the churches to confirm they are offering the blessing and when the service will be held.

Holy Spirit Parish, 2230 Lake Michigan Drive NW, Grand Rapids, (616) 453-6369.

St. Anthony of Padua, 2510 Richmond Street NW, Grand Rapids, MI 49504, (616) 453-

8229.

Sacred Heart of Jesus, 151 Garfield Ave SW, Grand Rapids, 49504, (616) 459-8362.

St. Adalbert Basilica and St. James, 654 Davis Ave NW, Grand Rapids, 49504, (616) 458-3065.

St. Isidore, 628 Diamond Ave NE, Grand Rapids, 49503, (616) 459-4731.

Our Lady of Consolation, 4865 11 Mile Rd NE, Rockford, 49341, (616) 866-0931.

St. Paul the Apostle, 2750 Burton St. NE, Grand Rapids, 49546, (616) 949-4170.





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