



Dakota Adventist Academy Principal Larry Unterseher and business manager Marvin Denney stand in the "circle" surrounded by staff members and students. The circle is the place where everyone meets to socialize between classes.

Circle Unbroken As D.A.A. Reopens

BY JAMES L. FLY

In a state where the last name of the governor is Sinner, the saints of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, along with their fellow North Dakotans, have suffered through the worst drought in half a century, a "big dry" whose unrelenting sun has weakened North Dakota's enduring motto, "strength from the soil."

Crops have withered in the parched fields, forcing some farmers to sell out. Tithe has dropped more than eight percent in the Dakota Conference, the biggest loss in the Mid-America Union.

North Dakota Adventists may be down but don't count them out, for they are the sons and daughters of the pioneers, survivors of howling blizzards and roaring hailstorms, men and women who brace themselves continually against the aching

loneliness of isolated farms, the fickleness of unpredictable weather. They're tightening their belts and hunkering down, praying against hope that the drought will end next spring and the grasshoppers will stay away. They know if they wait long enough the rain will fall again, producing bountiful harvests of wheat and corn.

It is precisely this North Dakota tenacity in the face of adversity that has helped them and their South Dakota neighbors to prevail by reopening their academy just a year after closing it down due to financial problems. Only one other academy in North America this century, Mt. Ellis in Montana, has ever done that, according to Patsy Wagner, chairman of Dakota Adventist Academy's newly established development committee and current

president of D.A.A.'s alumni association.

Patsy's daughter, Stephanie, has the distinction of being one of a handful of students to attend both of these academies. Stephanie, like many other D.A.A. students last year, was forced to attend a boarding academy outside of her home conference. Twenty-three went to Platte Valley Academy in Nebraska. Others went to Maplewood in Minnesota and Campion in Colorado.

While they felt welcome, they are happy to be back home again, reunited in D.A.A.'s famous "circle," a round area located in the middle of the academy-under-one-roof, the place where they socialize between classes and jobs.

I watched Stephanie as she and the new D.A.A. principal, Larry Unterseher, raised



the American flag together early Sunday morning, August 21—registration day. Then Stephanie raised the North Dakota flag by herself because it was smaller.

"It sure feels good to be raising the North Dakota flag and not Montana's," Stephanie said with a laugh. "I really liked Mt. Ellis, but I like it here better. It's home."

Unterseher, the former education director of the Dakota Conference, spent a year away from "home" himself as the principal of Upper Columbia Academy in Spangle, Washington last year. When he was called to come to D.A.A. this year to reopen the school, he turned the call down twice but finally decided to accept it because a still

small voice seemed to be saying, "This is where I need you."

"Friends told Rhonda (his wife and registrar of the school), and me we were crazy to go from a 250-student school to D.A.A. because it would hurt our career, but career doesn't mean anything if you're not where the Lord wants you," he told me.

"There's something special about this area and these people."

Unarguably, Tom and Ella Mae Thompson are two of the most special people. They have been with Dakota Adventist secondary education for 28 years—11 years at D.A.A. and 18 years at Sheyenne River Academy, Harvey, North Dakota, the predecessor of D.A.A. Even when all the students and faculty left last summer, the Thompsons, along with their North Dakota colleagues Dennis and Cheryl Kaiser (maintenance man and food service director), checked the furnace several times a day during the long cold winter. They also cleaned rooms and kept watch over the \$13 million empty academy building nestled on 1,300 acres in the rolling hills above the Missouri River on the Lewis and Clark Trail some 15 miles northwest of Bismarck, North Dakota's capital.

"To know that there are students living in the dorms again is a beautiful feeling. It's good to be back in business," Thompson told me while carrying a plant through the "circle."

Dakota Adventist Academy would not be back in business if it were not for the



Sheldon Fisher of Richardton, North Dakota, helps his daughter, Shannon, move into the girls' dorm at D.A.A. A farmer who has served on D.A.A.'s building committee and board, Fisher says he will only harvest about a third of a normal crop of wheat, oats and barley this year due to the drought.



Patsy Wagner, D.A.A.'s development committee chairman and president of the alumni association, is working hard to make fund raising systematic for the academy. She and her husband, Wencil, live on a ranch near Lark, North Dakota.

dedicated lay members of the conference who have given more than sacrificially to make an impossible dream come true. Almost as soon as the academy closed last August 12, a lay advisory committee headed by Cliff Kahler, a farmer from Goodrich, North Dakota, began investigating the feasibility of reopening the school.

After much discussion and prayer, they appointed Ron Miller, Dakota Conference ABC manager, as chairman of the committee to reopen D.A.A. Miller and his committee members surveyed the 5,000 members of the conference by mail to determine whether or not they really wanted to see the academy reopen. The majority did. Delegates to the February 28 constituency meeting made it official by voting to reopen the school 229 to 158.

Prior to that, Miller's committee had sent the members detailed information as to exactly how much it would cost. D.A.A. would need \$294,000 in cash to operate debt-free for the 1988-89 school year, based on 55 students. By registration day the members had sent in \$300,000 plus over \$30,000 for extra worthy student money if any more students wanted to attend the school. This was badly needed since about half of D.A.A.'s students require financial assistance.

"Money came in from every corner of the conference. With a good school year, I don't see anything but an increase. We've seen God leading 100 percent of the time in this project," Miller reported.

Bent over a computer terminal in the school's business office, Dakota Conference Treasurer Douglas Hilliard whose twin sons, Duane and Doug, attend the academy, told me just how amazing the response has been.

"The people have really come through with worthy student funds. Large donations have come in at the last minute. It's a pleasure to see these assets used in a productive way for the benefit of our students. Youth evangelism is what we're all about," Hilliard said.

Even with the extra worthy student money, though, some students had to be turned away, an agonizing decision for Unterseher and Marvin Denney, the business manager.

Fortunately, one of those students was not Brent Mercer of Sioux Falls, South Dakota. Brent wanted to go to D.A.A. with his friend, Brad Mayer, so badly that he went down to the hardware store and traded his bicycle in on a new pair of tennis shoes and pawned his radio so he could buy a new shirt and tie, trusting somehow that he would be able to go.

His mother was in the hospital in a body cast and had no money to help him.

When Marvin Denney told Brent's story to the Bismarck church on Sabbath, August 20, the members contributed \$3,500, enabling Brent to go to school.

"It's really wonderful that North Dakota people are willing to help a South Dakota boy get a Christian education," Allen Mayer, Brad's father, said on registration day.

Mayer, who works for a sign company in Sioux Falls, and his wife, Mary, a nurse, are sending their son, Brad, to D.A.A. despite the fact that most other Adventist families in Sioux Falls choose to send their children to either Maplewood Academy in Minnesota or Platte Valley Academy in Nebraska, schools which are geographically closer than D.A.A.

"It's the conference school and we feel like we should do everything we can to



support it and make it a success," Mayer said.

Brent Mercer and Brad Mayer are two of 71 students enrolled at D.A.A. this year, 16 more than the 55 required to balance the budget, a surplus which has been a source of great encouragement to Unterseher and his staff.

Not only have Dakota Adventists reopened their academy with a surplus of students, but by January 1, 1989 they also expect to pay the final \$125,000 of \$1 million they owed to the General Conference just two years ago. The D.A.A. building represented the largest percentage of the debt. The General Conference has graciously matched the Dakota Conference \$200,000 for the last two years. They will still be paying off additional debt on the faculty and staff housing, however, amounting to \$358,044.12.

On top of all this, they raised \$93,000 to



Carolyn Lehman and her son, Shaun, man the last station during registration. The Lehman family recently moved from St. Louis to Bismarck where Shaun's father, Dennis, works as the chief technologist at the Q & R Medical Clinic. Last year Shaun attended Sunnysdale Academy but the Lehmans decided he should go to D.A.A. this year because the school needs students. "We really want to see this school make it," says Carolyn.

pay off back debts owed to vendors in the Bismarck-Mandan area, the financial crisis which precipitated the closing of the school in the first place.

Furthermore, Ron Miller reports that members have already pledged \$115,000 for the next four years. Of course, to operate, D.A.A. will take more money and that is why Patsy Wagner, a teacher by training and experience, is working overtime to make fund raising systematic for the beleaguered academy.

Wagner lives with her husband, Wencil, on a 3,000-acre ranch near Lark, North Dakota. She told me they've had "a disastrous year." One time they dug a ditch to get some water for their cattle but hit nothing but dust. Tempted to sell their herd, they prayed about it and the next morning rain fell. God seemed to be telling them to not be too hasty.

"We've had answers to prayer so many times," she told me with a bright smile.

Patience and a prayerful attitude are two virtues she will need in her role as development committee chairperson. She will also need professional guidance and she's already getting it in a big way.

The General Conference's Philanthropic

Left: Dennis Kaiser, a North Dakota native and a former pastor in the Dakota Conference, is currently serving as the academy's maintenance man. He and his wife, Cheryl, food service director, kept watch over the empty academy last winter along with Tom and Ella Mae Thompson.

Service for Institutions (P.S.I.), has chosen D.A.A. to be part of their AAA Challenge, a matching funds program to encourage alumni to support their alma mater. Wagner praises P.S.I. and its assistant director for education, Luann Wolfe, who has advised her on how to go about increasing support from alumni as well as from the local community.

Wagner is compiling a mission statement for the school and plans to maintain careful donor records with consistent expressions of appreciation. In addition, she wants to create a community awareness of D.A.A. and find ways to market Christian education among the parents of academy-age students.

"We would have enough students from the Dakotas to fill the academy if we could attract the 65 percent who are going to public school," she said.

Admittedly, it's a formidable challenge. Due to economic factors and lack of commitment, a number of Adventist elementary schools, the feeders of D.A.A., have closed in the last few years, and there is no elementary school at all in Western North Dakota now. Conference education director Barry Mahorney, however, does not expect any closures this year, and one new school building will soon be completed in Carrington, North Dakota.

Patsy Wagner is coordinating a special ribbon-cutting ceremony honoring the reopening of D.A.A. during alumni weekend, September 30-October 2. She's hoping to get a prominent person from the state or city government to officiate, and



Dakota Adventist Academy is one of the finest educational facilities in the church. Opened in 1977, the four-acre complex under one roof sits on a rise above the Missouri River on the famous Lewis and Clark Trail some 15 miles Northwest of Bismarck, North Dakota's capital.

she's trying to persuade the media to cover the event, which will include a 5-kilometer run.

Like Patsy Wagner, Don Shelton, the new Dakota Conference president, impressed me as someone who is upfront and upbeat about the academy.

"There's been so much negativism about D.A.A. around the North American Division. We're hoping to change that," he said.

Shelton told me they have finished some of the duct work in the heating system which will save money in heating costs this winter by confining heat to independent areas. Some other parts of the academy building remain unfinished, almost as though the workmen just walked off the job. The materials are in storage. D.A.A.'s new industrial technology teacher, Bob Leake, plans to have his students work on these areas as a class project which will help them learn as they earn.

D.A.A. has a dynamic new staff—young, energetic and enthusiastic.

"They don't know the meaning of can't," said Larry Unterseher.

"Every one of them is a miracle. I hired some of them over the phone. They said yes without even looking at the school."

As an example of their dedication, the staff members themselves have pledged a total of \$220 a month to help a worthy student.

New emphases at D.A.A. this year include computer technology and spiritual outreach. The school has purchased new IBM compatible computers to help the students prepare for today's computerized workplace.

John Solomon, a sophomore taskforce missionary from Weimar College, will lead the students this year in outreach programs ranging from clown ministry to adopt-a-grandparent.

"My basic goal is to help the students realize that true education is learning to serve others. I want to involve them in practical activities which will enhance their classroom learning," Solomon said.

While touring the four-acre complex with Dennis Kaiser, I met Bonnie Peden, the girls' dean and home economics teacher.

She came to D.A.A. from Valley Grande Academy in Texas. I asked her what made her decide to leave a secure position in sunny Texas for an uncertain future on the bleak prairie of North Dakota.

She fingered her keys and smiled. "I've always wanted to be a dean. Plus, when do you get a chance to reopen a school? It sounded like fun," she replied.

Staff, students and parents alike had fun on registration day unpacking boxes and filling out forms. That evening Dakota Conference Secretary Marvin Lowman spoke for the worship service held in the main chapel.

"It's been a long time since we've had a group of students singing praises to the Lord. It sounded like angel music . . .

Today a great prayer has been answered and you are part of that prayer," he told the students.

After the worship service, the students and faculty filed out to the front lawn to eat watermelon and participate in the traditional handshake greeting.

Tears mingled with smiles as handshakes and hugs rippled up and down the line. The sun was setting golden in the west while the moon rose full and clear in the south above the silhouetted tawny buttes, a beautiful benediction to a most remarkable day.

But the students and faculty members didn't seem to notice. As the motto on the D.A.A. sign says, they were too busy "building friendships for eternity." ★



D.A.A. "patriarch" Tom Thompson, math teacher, embraces one of his returning students during the traditional greeting time on registration evening. Looking on is new English teacher Kent Boyle, a recent graduate of Southern College.