Dr. Tom Isern's NDSU history students paint historic Zeeland Hall

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An anonymous donor bought the yellow cream paint applied to the historic Zeeland Hall this fall.

I think the donor wishes to remain anonymous because a public act of charity might diminish his reputation as a curmudgeon. I asked him why he wrote the check for the paint, and he said, “I just wanted to do something for the community.”

About a year earlier I heard those exact same words from another, nearby source. I had been dealing with Rosalee and Dave Silbernagel about their new business venture, reopening the Zeeland Cafe, right next to the old hall, under the new name of the Sportman’s Den. They firmed and fawed until Dave finally said, “I just wanted to do something for the community.”

When I brought 15 of my students to Zeeland to do the paint job on the Neo-Colonial 1936, WPA hall, we were served a breakfast in the school by Gloria Lacher, the school cook. Zeeland School enroll 38 students. K.12 Gloria recounted how she takes suggestions from the pupils and tries to cook what they request. She also says she cooks a heck of a lot of Kool-Aid.

Gloria’s husband, Mayor Pius Lacher, Jr., has anchored the movement for restoration of the hall. He ran over lift getting painters up to reach the high gables, while his son Mike ran the other, they had finished boot harvest late the previous evening.

The mover and shaker of things pertaining to Zeeland Hall is Joyce Scherr, who works for the school district. Neither she nor Pius is great about public speaking. Their actions speak for them.

Oh, and not to forget Bontie and John Wiskus, who drove over from Lehr with three cast iron kettles of beef stew. Or McIntosh County Bank, Ashley/Zeeland, which made a significant gift to defray expenses, leading a good group of donors. Or Prince Fumber, of Wishek, who equipped the crew of painters.

For some years now, I have been in service learning projects, organized under the auspices of my research center, the Center for Heritage Renewal, and enlisting volunteers from my classes at NDSU. So, what do the students learn on an expedition such as our most recent: painting Zeeland Hall?

First, they get some history. In this case, they learned what the WPA was and what Neo-Colonial Architecture is. The larger historical lesson had to do with the rise, decline and resilience of county towns on the Northern Plains. It was good to hear about all the movies, dances, ball games, weddings and roller-skating parties that took place through the decades in Zeeland Hall. It was perhaps more important to learn that the week before we arrived to do the painting, the St. Andrew’s fall supper served nearly 400 diners in the hall.

Second, the students got a close look at civics and leadership in a small town. They observed how without any apparent command and control, people kept arriving and doing things that needed to be done. They observed people getting up early and working hard and being kind to one another.

So now the historic Zeeland Hall has a new roof, is listed on the National Register of Historic Places, and it sports a new coat of paint which looks particularly fetching by lamplight at night. Go have a look. Pick up some meat sausage at Zeeland Super Valu. Eat a prime rib at the Pastime. Say hello from me.

Mayor Pius Lacher, Jr.
Joyce Scherr
Pius Lacher, Jr. and his son Mike, provided lifts so the painters could reach the high places.

Ronnie and John Wiskus of Lehr brought over cast iron kettles of beef stew for the painting crew.

Rain on Saturday of the painting weekend slowed down the project, but Dr. Isern and his students headquartered at Renae and David Silbernagel’s eatery, the Sportsman’s Den, where they watched a live-streamed NDSU Bison football game on a computer.