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For the Swansons of Northfield, the St. Olaf Christmas Festival is more than a gift of music from the college to the community. For them it is a longtime labor of love.

Family Affair

By Elizabeth Child Photographs by David Gonnerman '90

It is 11 a.m. on the first Wednesday of November 2006. In three and a half weeks thousands of people will pack Skoglund Center Auditorium for the St. Olaf Christmas Festival. Over the course of four days and four performances, audiences will be transported by the sounds of five St. Olaf choirs, the St. Olaf Orchestra and College Pastor Bruce Benson's readings from the Book of Luke.

No secret to Oles, Skoglund Auditorium is usually a gymnasium. Basketball nets hang in front of the stage, immobile scoreboards flank either side of it and conference pennants line the west wall. By the time the curtain is drawn for the choirs' dress rehearsal, any hint of sweaty hands passing basketballs must be expunged.

That job falls squarely on Judy Seleen Swanson '57, a slight woman with knowing eyes and a warm smile. She says softly but assuredly that the visuals must help "three to four thousand people at a time to focus on the incarnation, on the creation, on the mysteries of it all."

Since 1992 Judy has created the backdrop for the Christmas Festival and the look of the printed program. She is a liturgical artist known for her ability to communicate complex themes with deceptive simplicity. She combines the boldness of Matisse with the clean lines of Scandinavian design, using stylized cutouts and vivid colors.

For 15 years the Swanson family has contributed intelligent and artful interpretations of the Christmas Festival theme to sets that enhance the music without overshadowing it. Even the grandchildren get into the act, continuing a tradition of family collaboration and do-it-yourself know-how. Judy Swanson (lower left) is the chief architect of the project. Husband Steve ties critical knots and handles the electrical wiring. Nick, 17, shown with Steve (center, left), likes to climb, the higher the better. Son Noel (upper right) is a meticulous craftsman, while son Scott (lower right, with Judy and Noel), is the project manager. Grandsons William, 13, and Kristopher, 11 (center, bottom) also volunteer to help.

The set is both a creative challenge and a major installation. Fortunately Judy has a von Trapp-like entourage that is at once collaborative, artistic and muscular. It includes two handy sons, husband Steve Swanson — a retired St. Olaf professor of English and a Lutheran pastor — three strapping grandsons and family friend John Dubba, a Northwest Airlines pilot who helps with construction, installation and assembly. Daughter-in-law Lynette Ostlie Swanson '80 serves as a seamstress and arranges props.

"When the Swansons stepped to the forefront to design the Christmas Festival set, it was a new day," says Director of Music Organizations Bob Johnson, who is responsible for hiring Judy and two of her sons each year; the others are volunteers. "Judy's intelligence and creativity, plus the family to help her with construction, have become a winning combination," he says.

The Swansons steal time between basketball practices and after games throughout November to create the set for Christmas Fest. The oldest sons, Scott, age 49, a 1988 St. Olaf graduate, and Noel, age 45, do most of the heavy lifting and offer artistic input. Scott is a remodeling contractor in Northfield, and Noel is a carpenter and antique dealer in Minneapolis. Both were studio art majors in college.

The youngest son, Brian, 41, helped with the set until 2005, but now has a thriving contracting business in St. Paul that absorbs his time. Daughter Shelley, 47, is a Twin Cities-based writer who would rather pick up a pen than a paintbrush.

After 15 Christmas Festivals, Scott and Noel have simplified the process and solidified their roles. Scott is the project manager. Today, he is busy ironing out a wrinkle in this year's festival. Six-by-eight-foot-square speakers that accompany a new organ need space next to the choirs. The addition thrills the music department, but it's akin to hiding two baby elephants on stage. Scott isn't fazed. "This is like a remodeling project. I always figure out how to solve a problem," he says.

Calling it a camouflage job, he paints the speaker cases black. Later he deploys them as platforms for lighted Christmas trees.

Noel is a meticulous artist who carves Judy's more delicate designs in reusable Styrofoam and wood. He also helps her position

85 30-inch magnolia-shaped leaves with hanging fruit to make a garland that will arc over the choirs. “A little left, a little higher. That’s it,” Judy calls out, wanting each leaf to seem to sway naturally.

A few days before the concert, she’s forced to art-direct as her son mounts a wobbly scaffold that rises straight to the ceiling. Noel stretches his body sideways over the rail to pin a banner. “Ugh,” Judy groans, raising her hand to shield her view — switching hats from exacting artist to loving mom.

Husband Steve is the technician in charge of electrical wiring, including soldering strings of Christmas lights that mice have chewed through in storage. His most critical job is creating a pulley and cabling system to lift and secure two-story purple panels to cover the scoreboards. It takes four men, including 17-year-old grandson Nick, to lift the panels. Once they realize that they’ve blocked the exit sign, which violates fire codes, Scott and Noel step in again to solve the problem. “I have talented sons,” Steve says with a grin.

GROWING UP SWANSON

How does a family work together for weeks, sometimes into the wee morning hours, and avoid driving each other crazy? “We’ve always worked together,” Judy says.

“It was a fun family,” she recalls, reflecting on the years when the clan moved far and wide for Steve’s jobs. “A 10 year old might be laying a wood floor or roofing. When we lived in Oregon in the 1960s we made candles and our own wicks, and we’d dig for clams. When we lived on the Gulf of Mexico Steve had the kids weaving crab nets. We’d pick huckleberries and make pies. We made clothes and jewelry, and we grew our own vegetables. People were self-sufficient in the ’60s. We were products of that time.”

As the oldest child, Scott was aware of the financial difficulties when Steve was in his first teaching job and Judy was in graduate school for art at the University of Oregon. “The only time it wasn’t fun,” says Scott, “was when we had about 60 cents and no money in the bank.

“We’re not just decorating for Christmas. We’re creating a visual message that will help people appreciate the richness of the music.”

— Judy Seleen Swanson ’57

“Some of that is really good,” he adds, like learning that they could camp by the ocean for free. Having held paying jobs since age 13, Scott says the do-it-yourself upbringing “defined who I am today.”

A favorite childhood memory for Scott and Noel is the pottery studio equipped with two potter’s wheels in their Seguin, Texas, home when Steve taught at Texas Lutheran University. The family even held an art sale.

Later, in Alberta, Canada, Noel recalls following his father into abandoned houses to salvage wood for building projects. Steve paid the children to straighten nails by the pound and then used the reclaimed nails to renovate houses, build furniture, boats and trailers, and fix up a fire-damaged cabin that the Swansons bought for a song.

Salvaging got into Noel’s blood. As a kid he’d crawl under old houses to dig for antique bottles. His salvaging hobby turned into a serious interest in history and antiques and, at times, has led to treasure. He recently paid \$50 for a painting that sold for \$27,000 at auction, surprising even the dealer.

Moving every couple of years forced family members to rely on one another. The Swanson children grew up to value both independence and community. In hindsight, Judy says she learned from their flexibility.

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COUNTDOWN TO CHRISTMAS FEST

Mid-January: Theme and program decided by the five choral conductors, College Pastor Bruce Benson and artist Judy Swanson.

End of May: Judy presents initial design concepts to the conductors.

Mid-July: St. Olaf Choir Conductor Anton Armstrong approves the final graphic treatment for Christmas Fest invitations and announcements.

Mid-October: Judy finalizes set colors by placing a purple St. Olaf Choir robe next to them. She finishes artwork for the program cover and sends color copies of set design sketches to St. Olaf Media Services Coordinator Jim Stanoch, who is in charge of lighting.

November 1: Judy’s husband, Steve Swanson, and her sons Scott and Noel unload semis storing props and sets, which will be artfully reused. Damage from mice is repaired. Judy makes scale drawings of images and words that Noel carves in Styrofoam. Backdrops and large triangular panels to cloak the stage wings are painted.



Day after Thanksgiving: Backdrop and triangular panels are mounted on stage. Bleachers are erected.

Sunday after Thanksgiving: First mass choir rehearsal. Banners are made, and Steve welds banner poles.

After the last home basketball game before Christmas Fest, 9:30 p.m. until 2 a.m.: The major installation takes place, including hoisting panels over scoreboards, replacing conference pennants with Christmas Fest banners, and mounting images and lettering for the theme and key phrases Judy incorporates into the design.

Day before Christmas Fest, noon: Tech rehearsal; signs are hung outside Tostrud; decorated Christmas trees and gar-

lands are placed in the foyer and lobby.

Day before Christmas Fest, 7 p.m.: Dress rehearsal, final tweaks to the set.

Sunday night after final concert: The entire Swanson family strikes the set to ready the gym for Monday classes.

COMING HOME

In 1974 the moving stopped. Steve felt a strong pull to return home to Northfield, where his parents and several family members still lived. He followed the footsteps of his father, Carl Rudyard (“Cully”) Swanson ’25, to St. Olaf. A hall-of-fame quarterback at the college, Cully later taught English, then served as dean of men and head of men’s admissions, and later led the St. Olaf admissions department.

Judy struggled to make peace with a quieter life in Northfield, but being an Ole helped her adjust. She was glad to be near her college mentors, Arnold Flaten ’22, St. Olaf professor of art, and architect and Professor Ed Sovik ’39, who taught drafting.

Flaten reviewed Judy’s portfolio and recommended her to Augsburg Fortress, the publisher for the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. She started designing book covers “between doing the laundry and the cooking and watching the kids,” she says. Sometimes, after putting the children to bed, she would work all night and drive a book cover to Minneapolis in the morning — on no sleep.

Today, each of the strong-willed Swanson children is self-employed. They wander in and out of their parents’ house on St. Olaf Avenue, three blocks from where Scott and Lynette live with their three sons.

Scott describes Christmas Fest as “the best

job I have all year. I can work independently, and I don’t have to work around other people’s schedules.”

The Swanson sons’ talent for overcoming any construction challenge allows Judy to use her imagination — including conjuring up enormous Romanesque arches they raised for the backdrop to Christmas Fest a few years ago. She works like an architect, showing Scott and Noel graphed drawings and letting them erect the framework, shape the images, paint the sets and keep the project on schedule.

LIGHTING THE DARKNESS

Although the physical labor is condensed into a month, Judy starts her work the previous January, helping the conductors and Pastor Benson decide on the next Christmas Fest theme. She carefully considers the theme and musical texts to cull their essence in the design. “We’re not just decorating for Christmas,” she says. “We’re creating a visual message that will help people appreciate the richness of the music.”

“For God so Loves the World,” the theme of the 2006 festival, offered the comforting message that, despite wars abroad and divisiveness in the United States, God has not abandoned us. The garland of golden leaves symbolizes the “wonderful arc of God’s care and love,” Judy says, serving to remind us that “God provides all we need. The world is a

treasure we need to take care of.”

Benson consults Judy before writing his poetry for the introduction of the festival program. “She has a great theological understanding,” he says. “I’ve learned a lot about Christmas festival themes from talking to Judy.”

The design for Christmas Fest is like a glove without a hand until the Sunday after Thanksgiving. Judy typically sits in the corner assembling banners as the choirs enter the stage for the first mass choir rehearsal. At last she hears the music and tells herself, “Oh, that’s why we’re doing this.”

“It’s the most wonderful, restorative time,” she says.

On opening night, she stands at the back of the auditorium and assesses the flaws in her work, like any artist with high standards. Then, before the doors close, she slips into the lobby, away from the set that shimmers under the lights, and listens to the music with her eyes closed. “Christmas is the darkest time of the world for us in the Northern Hemisphere,” she says. “We relate to the dark places of our inner being and beg for light in that darkness. The choirs and the orchestra do not disappoint.”

Nor does the thoughtful set, which never gives away that a referee’s whistle sounded harshly here only days before. 🐾

Elizabeth Child runs a communications and marketing firm in Northfield.

The Amanda Kimer Award for Excellence in Social Work

When Amanda Kimer passed away from natural causes in 1996 during her junior year at St. Olaf, the Social Work Program lost one of its most promising students.

“Amanda was a positive individual, a shining personality,” says Social Work Professor Mary Carlsen ’79. “Her smile was warm and genuine. She looked forward to working with people in real need ... the poor, those on the margins of our society.”

The Amanda Kimer Award was established to honor a social work senior who best exemplifies the hard work, passion to serve others and sense of humor that Amanda possessed.

Wendy Harig ’07 is the most

recipient. “Wendy’s performance with the Rice County Day Treatment Program during her field practicum and in her senior project with young people who have mental illness was exemplary,” says Carlsen. “Her commitment to the field of social work is deep and we are certain she will prove to be a leader in her career.”

“It was an honor to receive the Kimer Award,” says Harig, who intends to use the award money to help pay the cost of taking her bachelor’s level licensure exam. “Amanda is remembered by the social work faculty, her family and friends as a truly amazing young woman. It is extremely flattering to be seen to possess similar characteristics.”



Amanda Kimer



Wendy Harig (center) was honored with her award at the annual Kimer tea in May. She was joined by her parents John and Joan Harig (back left and right) and also by Amanda Kimer’s mother, Barb (front left) and grandmother, Hazel Smith (front right).

Kimer Award winners include:

- Bentley Durband ’97
- Julie Holligshead ’97
- Daniel Struebing ’99
- The Class of 2000
- Shannon Beck ’01
- Lindsey Nelson ’02
- Elizabeth Van Arnam ’03
- Abigail Love ’04
- Mee Yang ’04
- Brandi du’Monceaux ’05
- Joy Scott ’06
- Wendy Harig ’07

DAVID GONNERMAN '90