To be grand once more... Decorah family brings new life to historic renovation projects

BY ROZ WEIS,

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Dean and Lois Humpal and their daughter Chanda have a passion for renovating historic homes.

They've restored more than a dozen properties in the area in nearly two decades.

Their efforts were rewarded recently with the presentation of the 2024 Historic Preservation Award by the Decorah Historic Preservation Commission.

As proud owners of restored homes scattered across Decorah, their first project was the historic Engbretson residence at 305 W. Broadway in the area's Historic District. They purchased the Victorian home in December 2005.

Decorah Historic Preservation Award honorees Dean and Lois Humpal and their daughter Chanda are pictured during the May 22 ceremony at City Hall. (Driftless Multimedia photo by Roz Weis)

Hartvig and Thea Engbretson designed and built the home on Broadway in 1910. The late Victorian house showcases a three-storied turret marked with Queen Anne Style. The exterior is entirely firebrick. The house extends approximately 5,000 sq. ft. over four floors with six-and-a-half bathrooms and seven bedrooms.

The Humpals set to work renovating the home from floor to ceiling, with new wiring and plumbing, moving walls, installing insulation and air conditioning, refinishing floors and landscaping the yard.

Home fixups are rife with challenges, and the scope of the project was more than originally envisioned, but they worked at a fast pace over the winter months, opening just in time for Luther College graduation weekend a few months later – in May 2006.

The "renovation bug" had hit the Humpals hard.

Over the following years their passion for renovating homes was sparked, and they have completed more than a dozen projects, including homes on Grove Street, Vernon Street, Mechanic Street, St. Lawrence Street, Montgomery Street, Lloyd Street, Fifth Avenue, Terrace Street, Main Street and Mill Street. They also restored a home on Dessel Street in Ossian.

The Humpals credited their six children, their friends and local contractors for the effort in completing all the renovations. They have been diligent in getting the details in each project completed "just right". Combining new and classic styles is a common goal.

Their daughter Chanda has followed in their footsteps, taking the reins in restoring an historic home on Mechanic Street.

During their renovation endeavors the Humpals have uncovered some original features in the homes, and they've focused their energy on bringing new life to the pieces.

During the May 22 Historic Preservation Awards program, the audience expressed amazement at some of the "before-and-after" pictures from the renovated homes.

Their focus on details is evident in all their adventures, including their most recent project – the restored Hjalmar Carlson Duplex at 606 Vernon Street. The Humpals have made their home in several of their renovated homes, and now live in the Hjalmar Carlson 1938 International Style, Art Deco duplex on Vernon Street, designed by well-known Decorah architect Charles Altfillisch. The renovation began in 2021.

During the awards program, the Humpals were applauded for their craftsmanship and contribution to Decorah's visual streetscape.

The framed plaques (signed by Decorah Mayor Lorraine Borowski) presented to the Humpals reads as follows: "Presented to Lois, Dean and Chanda Humpal for their long-standing commitment to rehabilitating historic properties."

Their energy and commitment to keeping unique features in place is to their credit.