

Heart Fund Show's 46th annual fundraiser set for February 28

by Michael Andrews

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The Heart Fund Show, one of Gilmer County's longest running annual events also recognized as the longest running fundraiser in the entire 51-year history of the American Heart Association, returns to the Ellijay Elementary Auditorium stage Saturday, February 28. The eclectic, down-home evening of music, humor and homemade desserts is scheduled to begin at 6 p.m. sharp and will last, as has been tradition throughout the years, until the final name on the event's lengthy list of performers has been called.

Each year, the Heart Fund Show generates a sizeable donation for the American Heart Association, which focuses primarily on cardiovascular science, cardiovascular education and community health programs. Typically, the donation is in the \$20,000 - \$25,000 range. Despite unfavorable economic conditions, an ongoing strain that has locked tight consumer's pocketbooks and subsequently has taken a toll on the amount of donations given to many charities, the Heart Fund Show will soldier on into its 46th annual event with a few adjustments that take into account the downsized budgets of attendees.

According to Heart Fund Show organizer Russell Hood, this year's admission price has been dropped from \$5 a person to \$1. The traditional cake auction, which is usually to thank for a high percentage of donated funds, will also be done a little differently this year in the form of a raffle.

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Photo by Michael Andrews

Clockwise, from left, Heart Fund Show regulars Floyd Scott, Larry Davis, Vic Davis and Scott Kirk perform at last year's show. Though still a charitable fundraiser, a few adjustments have been made to this year's Heart Fund Show format due to the less than favorable state of the nation's economy.

Though faced with much more scrutiny and opposition than the \$700-plus

billion bank bailout that was the exiting Bush bunch's finger-flipping coup de grace, the Obama administration's economic stimulus plan has passed both House and Senate obstacle courses and, now, it's wait and see time for those hoping their exported jobs or children's dilapidated elementary schools will at least be touched upon by the plan.

Whether the plan succeeds or fails, we should not forget one of President Obama's much-repeated campaign promises, refusing to neglect federal hourly minimum wage rate hikes.

The federal minimum wage rate was introduced by F.D.R. in 1938 as part of the Fair Labor Standards Act. Back then, minimum wage meant a whopping 25 cents an hour. Since then, the wage rate has increased, yes, though ever so slowly and without a timetable requiring a necessary hike at various intervals.

Throughout the 1960s and '70s the minimum wage rate saw 10 - 20 cent increases every one, two or four years. It jumped from \$1.60 to \$2 an hour as of 1974, but it took six years just for that 40 cent raise to take effect. This is a wage rate that is in place to keep employers from paying less than what is required of them by the government. But, over time it has become a proverbial stepchild often overlooked, neglected or not even discussed during periods of increased living expenses or economic decline.

The longest minimum wage freeze came on the heels of a national economic rebound that the Clinton administration never fails to take credit for. Between 1997 and 2007 - an entire decade - the minimum wage stood frozen at \$5.15 per hour. People still had to do a full work week of sweating, lifting, stocking, sweeping and smiling politely only to long be ignored by the powers-that-be. Seven of those years were under Bush's rule, three were under Clinton's. Both failed to recognize the hard work done by, and the increased amount of strain put upon, those being paid the stonewalled minimum wage.

In 2007, the rate was finally hiked to \$5.85 as part of a plan that would spread out gradual increases up to 2009. The current federal minimum wage rate of \$6.55 per hour applies in Georgia. But some workers are still paid \$5.15 per hour due to state laws. However, the federal increase could've very well been OK'd several years previous had it not been for rate hikes being attached to conveniently veto-ready legislation that was gladly refused by Bush until his final year in office.

President Obama has said that he would like to increase the minimum wage rate to \$9.50 by 2011. Whether or not that will actually happen remains to be seen. The way things are going now, we may be importing cheeseburgers and exporting English teachers by that time. But it is imperative that this and future administration(s) not treat raising the wage like a burden or long-overdue favor. Whether young or old, these hard working men and women deserve much better than that.



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Big-voiced Rossen rocks the house



Photo by Michael Andrews

Though attendance was down in comparison to many BEST shows of years past, Denmark's vocal powerhouse Stig Rossen delighted and surprised a half-full Ellijay Elementary School Auditorium Saturday night, February 14, as part of the Gilmer Arts and Heritage Association's continuing 2009 BEST Series. Rossen arrived complete with a stellar five-piece band that proceeded to shift comfortably between vintage rhythm and blues, orchestral pop, straight-ahead rock 'n' roll and songs culled from Rossen's years as a musical theater performer. Rossen showcased one of the most resounding and multifaceted voices to be heard on the E.E.S. stage in quite some time. His set paid tribute to such influences as Tom Jones, Stevie Wonder and Elvis Presley, touched upon his detours into gospel music and offered up selections from such musicals as "Chess," a production scored by Rossen's countrymen Bjorn Ulvaeus and Benny Andersson, formerly of 70s pop stars ABBA. One of the evening's most emotional moments came when Rossen performed a heartfelt rendition of Don McLean's "Vincent," based on the life and influence of troubled artist Vincent Van Gogh. He may not have been a household name to all in attendance before the show, but Rossen, nonetheless, gave the crowd a performance high on diversity and professionalism. The BEST Series continues March 7 with The Great American Rock 'n' Roll Revival, a package show featuring Atlanta classic rockers Butch & The Buckheads and others. At left, Rossen belts it out alongside bassist Sean Michael Ray and sax man Bobby Ricketts.

Building houses, building futures in rural Guatemala

by Becky Antworth

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Stroll along the rolling hills outside of Antigua, Guatemala, and you see the tiny, thatched huts of local villagers and farmers amid the cornfields and steep slopes of the emerald countryside.

Huts are a single, square room. At one end sits a small stove. In the rest, parents and perhaps half-a-dozen young children spread out on the dirt floor to sleep.

Most are made of mud, cornstalks and gap-toothed boards. When it rains, the floors turn to a soupy sludge, 6 inches deep. The walls weep wetness into the dark interior.

But in those hills, one hut stands out. On a ledge overlooking lush farmlands, sits a house with metal roof, metal siding, concrete floor - and, most notably, a covered porch to come in out of the rain and wipe off the mud in which parasites thrive.

That house, and some others like it in the hills near Jocotenango, wouldn't exist without a man who has his own house in the hills, miles away, in north Georgia.

Ken Werner and his wife Lois have made many trips from their home in Ellijay to do humanitarian work in Guatemala. For the past year, they've been making the trek to build houses for local families living below



Photo by Becky Antworth

Ken and Lois Werner look at several traditional garments, gifts from the local people in Guatemala. The couple is there now, helping to build more houses for those in need.

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the poverty line.

The housing project began from humble beginnings. But in just a short time the Werners, in conjunction with Health Ministries Association, raised enough money for materials for 10 houses in Guatemala. Five of those are already finished. When the couple left on another trip to the country last month, they were hopeful all 10 would be housing families by May.

For every house that goes up, though, dozens more families make requests. The demand is a little daunting for the 66-year-old retiree who fell into the third-world construction business a bit by accident, after he watched some native workers haphazardly trying to erect a house.

"They (the Guatemalans) didn't even have tool belts," Ken said, still befuddled. "They'd get to the top of a ladder and have to come right down because they'd forgotten something."

Their inefficiencies nagged at him. "I'm pretty methodical," he said, eliciting a knowing chuckle from his wife. That night, he lay awake in bed and mentally "finished the house" — building it, from the ground up, as the epitome of efficiency. The

next day, Ken put his mental plan into action. He organized the crew, helped them finish the house, and before he knew it he was the local expert.

Ken drafted a design for a 12x16 foot house made of metal, solid wood, and cement that could be efficiently erected in the rural countryside.

He put a divider down the middle and added a covered porch. He moved the cooking stove outside to keep homes free from soot and smoke. (Bathrooms are also an outdoors affair.)

The entire house would cost around \$2,000. As Ken, the soft-spoken and methodical man, told of the single donor who gave the funds for 10 houses up-front, his voice cracked and his eyes welled, still disbelieving, still overcome.

"This family had eight children," Ken said, as he scrolled through a slideshow from a previous trip. "All of them were sleeping in that one small room." In the picture, the 10 of them stood in a row in their new, two-room house.

In another, Ken, a white giant at 6 feet, towers over tan natives holding tools in

the steamy Central America sun.

The home building project operates through what's called a "sweat equity" program. The family getting a house must first have their old house torn down, and are responsible for feeding the workers building the new one — as many as 4 Americans and 10 Guatemalans.

Even though food is part of the deal, it's not always easy to accept from people with so little, the Werners said. Not to mention the fact that it could be "tilapia soup" — two whole fish in a puddle of broth.

In addition to the culinary challenges, building houses in the rural highlands, where roads are sparse and unpaved, and electricity is an anachronism, comes with its share of technical challenges.

For the most part, locals possess only hoes and machetes (the latter of which they use on everything from fingernails to fruit). So Ken takes his own tools to Guatemala — the saws and drills eliciting scrutiny from baggage handlers — and trucks the tools and other materials across two hours of uneven roads, to rural building sites.

Workers mix cement on site by corralling the gritty goo in a man-made pit (no plastic tubs, etc.) and churning it about with hoes and hand-drawn water (no faucets or hoses). Each house takes one to two weeks to finish, depending on glitches and weather.

"You learn to be real flexible," said Ken.

The ultimate goal is to train the local people to build the houses themselves. Ken hopes the ministry will raise enough to pay local workers, thereby creating jobs in a country where most men make \$3 a day. He's currently writing a construction manual, which will be translated to

native dialects.

"This process is an economical way for nations to build houses," he said.

"If we can improve their communities so they know they have a future if they stay [in Guatemala] they might be less likely to separate from their families to come here (the U.S.)," said Lois, who's also involved with other outreach programs in the country.

Guatemalans have openly embraced the help, and the demand for new houses continues to rise. If the interest around Antigua is any indication, the Werners could find themselves doing construction across all of Guatemala, donations permitting.

The thought is a bit daunting, admits the couple. But sometimes daunting is a good thing.

In his own home in the hills, amid a mountain of bags laid out in his basement — 50 large suitcases full of



Contributed photo

A house designed and built by Ken Werner and other volunteers in Guatemala stands finished and ready for its family to move in. Families must provide meals for workers, but materials and labor for construction are provided through donations. Up to 10 houses are expected to be finished by the end of February, and many more families have made requests.

stuffed bears, medical supplies, soap, tennis balls, shoes and clothes to cart to Guatemala on their next trip (American Airlines offers a baggage discount) — Ken can't help but smile. He shakes his head, still a little disbelieving, and pictures the

possibility that one day all the families in Guatemala will have cement floors to sleep on.

To make a monetary donation, or to contribute in other ways, visit the Health Ministries Association Web site at www.HMACofChrist.org.

Heart Fund

from 1B

"We still would like to pack the house and have folks come out and see a good, wholesome show," says Hood. "I don't have grand expectations about what we might raise, but I am still excited about the show. We've a lot of response as far as bands and performers signing up to play. We will be raffling off the cakes, instead of auctioning them, this year and we will also be raffling off some pretty big prizes like a \$600 gift certificate to the Bargain Barn, \$500 worth of gas at Green's Store, a freezer from Ace Hardware and a two-night stay at a cabin in Pigeon Forge. We've still got some good, exciting entertainment and we will still be doing the barbecue plates, too."

Those who have never attended a Heart Fund Show should expect a combination of telethon fundraiser-style diversity and a performance format similar to that used by Nashville's hallowed Grand Ole Opry. Acts usually play a 15 -20 minute, or three to four song, set.

In between acts, the cake auction — or cake raffle in this case — takes center stage. Show emcee Steve Purvis and master auctioneer Paul Mooney Jr. will again be handling their respective Heart Fund Show duties this year, confirms Hood.

The evening also offers a chance to see some of the area's best country, bluegrass and gospel entertainers perform. Mainstays like

Floyd Scott, Larry and Vic Davis, Ralph Chancey's Bluegrass Pickers, Mary Withrow and her miniature harmonicas, banjo player Tim Parker, classic country singer Charles Dover and The Hoyles, featuring Ellijay's own Mayor Al Hoyle, are just some of the performers who have highlighted past shows.

Last year, a thought-to-be-retired performer, country comedian Elmo Pickhandle, made his return to the Heart Fund stage. Gilmer guitarist Ed Forester, the man behind the ornery Pickhandle character, had all but hung up his overhauls and floppy hat for good as of 2006. But, since early 2007 the mischievous Pickhandle has made surprise appearances at the 45th annual Heart Fund Show and the 2008 ETC Bluegrass Festival, among other events. He'll be returning equipped with a sackful of knee slappers for this year's Heart Fund Show, says Hood. One can only hope Pickhandle's right hand man Vic Davis will be on hand to nip his sly colleague's potentially blue punchlines in the bud.

Over its near 50-year history, the show has also been embraced by generations of younger musicians. Several of today's younger participants grew up watching their parents or grandparents, now show veterans, participate. Others have been drawn to the show simply due to the fact that it benefits a worthwhile cause or because of the fun that's had not only onstage, but in the backstage halls and crannies of the school where it's been said that the best music of the night is often heard in informal, bare bones rehearsals.

Though country and bluegrass are the genres most prevalent at any Heart Fund Show, the event always features a little something for everyone. Past shows have welcomed rock 'n' rollers, instrumentalists, singer/songwriters, young pint-sized performers and even karaoke singers pitching in for the cause. Hood says that there is a "good number" of first-time acts penciled in on this year's lineup, as well.

The show will get underway at 6 p.m. Saturday night, Feb. 28; Barbecue plates at \$5 will be served starting at 4 p.m. Tickets can be purchased the night of the event or in advance at any ETC location.

As with last year's show, this year's Heart Fund festivities will be broadcast live on ETC-3.



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