

S.D. penitentiary chapel is reborn

Tuesday ♦ Dec. 4, 2001



is reborn

'Even some of the toughies are coming (to the chapel). Some had not been here for 10 or 12 years.'

— Gary Gurwell, Sioux Falls prison inmate, craftsman



Inmate Gary Gurwell helped refurbish the prison chapel, including the woodworking. TOP: Gurwell, 60, hopes to be able to ply his skills outside prison. He is up for parole in a week. Experts call his work top-notch. "It's really world-class," says Lyle Pedersen of AmeriGlas.

PHOTOS BY LLOYD B. CUNNINGHAM / ARGUS LEADER

Inmate's idea transforms musty theater into ornately decorated place of worship

BY RANDY HASCALL

Argus Leader

Christmas has never been a colorful holiday for inmates at the state penitentiary in Sioux Falls.

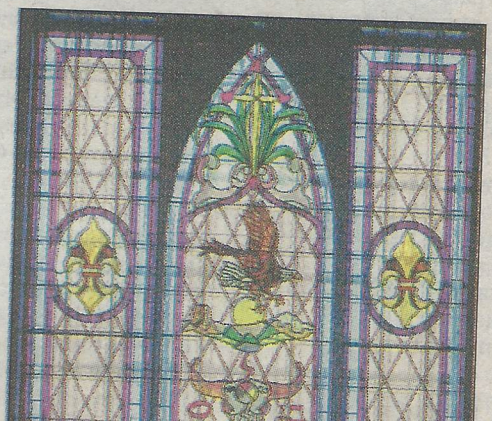
Year after year, they have gathered to worship in a drab old theater that has served as a chapel. They have sat in torn, soiled seats. Faded block-glass windows have screened much of the light.

But, when inmates gather this Christmas, they'll walk past hand-crafted

snowballed into a \$35,000 renovation project funded with private donations from churches, organizations and individuals. Trinity Corrections provided the work space and equipment.

Prisoners donated more than \$1,000 of their own money, topped by \$300 from one. Prison administrators and staff members also contributed.

Gurwell, who's serving a 75-year sentence for manslaughter, has spent 14½ years in



LORETTA SORENSEN / FOR THE ARGUS LEADER

Chapel: Other prisoners help inmate-designer finish project

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impressive, especially considering the prison's limited equipment, said Jack Harr of C-Lemme Custom Homes, who donated a contractor's table saw for the prison shop.

When Gurwell gets out of prison, Lemme said there will be a job for him at his Tea cabinet shop.

Gurwell, who created a special router bit out of a bolt, said he's glad to put his abilities to good use.

"It's something God gave me," said Gurwell, who remembers sketching designs and gears of a carnival octopus ride when he was 6 or 7 years old.

Bonnie Larsen, cultural activities coordinator at the prison, spearheaded the stained-glass window project, then led the drive to expand plans after Gurwell had completed a couple of windows.

"When I saw the beauty, it did not match the rest of the chapel," Larsen said. "I know God decided to create this chapel. There was favor on this from the start."

Larsen said resources seemed to flow into the prison as they were needed. She and Gurwell said the warden and senior staff were always supportive. Six to eight inmates built new chairs to replace the old worn ones.

The result is a bright, colorful, uplifting atmosphere.

"There's a lot of hurting in prison. You like it to be a place of rehabilitation," Larsen said. "When people enter the chapel, they say they don't feel like they're in prison."

The new chapel was showcased recently during a two-day open house that brought 120 outsiders into the prison. Among them were members of Gurwell's family.

I know God decided to create this chapel.

There was favor on this from the start.'

Bonnie Larsen
prison cultural activities

The improved chapel, with 200 seats built by inmates, has created a lot of interest, Gurwell, Larsen and Hubers say. The number of services has expanded to seven days a week and turnout has risen.

"Sometimes we're close to setting up chairs," Larsen said. "And inmates have treated it with such respect."

"Even some of the toughies are coming down," Gurwell said. "Some hadn't been here for 10 or 12 years. One of them couldn't believe how it changed."

Gurwell is particularly proud of his last two windows. One, titled The Good Shepherd, honors people who have died. The other, which represents American Indians, is titled Oyate Wanji, which means One People. That window includes a buffalo and eagle.

He also created two smaller windows – an American flag and Mount Rushmore – that will be displayed elsewhere in the prison.

As a finishing touch, Gurwell used old pallets and cedar to build three wooden crosses that stand on the stage.

The finished chapel is almost beyond description, said Larsen. "I couldn't envision it being so beautiful."

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ased the first copies of her book of poetry, "Sev-
ning Nov. 19 at Mount Marty College. The book
er and wife in the 1950s and '60s.

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l in "Grand-
d she was

recognized with state awards.

Her son, Bernie, is the publish-
er of *South Dakota Magazine* and
Nebraska Life. He has encouraged
her for a long time to gather her
work for publication. His office
oversaw the design and produc-
tion of her book

"I used to tease her that I want-
ed her to publish the poems so
that we could make a lot of mon-
ey," Bernie Hunhoff said. "But the
family is really pleased that she's
gone to the work of putting her
poems together."

Margaret Hunhoff is directing
all profits from the book to endow

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to changing my mind on it, but
they are going to have to make a
better case. They're pushing it as
a panacea to solve all the ag prob-
lems, and I don't see that."

Senate Majority Leader Bar-
bara Everist, R-Sioux Falls, sup-
ports the concept of growing a
valuable crop, but has concerns.

"It's illegal under federal law,
that's the main one, and federal
law preempts state law," Everist

said. "we ha
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Well

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and gazebo at the back of the chapel also is
The work on the wood trim, chair frames
are outstanding.

three crosses that adorn the chapel.
and helped build 200 chairs. He also made the
(including a Native American design, above)



Pedersen said the fine detail and designs
tiful and so well done."

ple won't get a chance to see it. It's so beau-
middle of a penitentiary because a lot of peo-
world class. I was almost sad to see this in the
provided the glass and supplies. "It's really
of America, the Nebraska company that
good as I've ever seen," said Lyle Pedersen
and seen his work.

He has the talent, according to profes-
sionals who have been to the prison chapel
opportunity to put his skills to work in the
more than a week from now, hopes to get an
appearance before a parole board a little
of an old man, who will make his first

windows was approved in January 1999, then
Gurwell's proposal to create stained-glass

looked tacky. I'm still amazed."
Before, it was a dull, drab, beat-up place. It
beings and prepare for life after prison.
helping prisoners become better human
tions, a nonprofit organization devoted to
ons," said Forrest Hubers of Trinity Corre-
as nice as any I've seen in all of those pris-
prisons, and I have to tell you this chapel is
prison, the last 15 years, I've been in 218
devoted thousands of hours to the project.

oped ideas and patterns in his head, then
hands of inmate Gary Gurwell, who devel-
ord, stained-glass windows created by the
They'll see the glow of seven multi-col-