

naomi west angel in disguise

By Ruby Sawin

Naomi West of the Bridgewater Retirement Community was born less than two miles from where she now lives ninety-six years later. In listening to her story, one hears of her concern and love for people.

After graduation from Bridgewater College in 1929, Naomi taught school in Southwest Virginia and later in New York State. After her marriage to Guy West, she became a busy pastor's wife and the mother of twin sons. She and her husband served churches in Virginia, Pennsylvania and California.

As president of Church Women United in York, Pa., Naomi organized a ministry for women in prison. "Women in jail had no one to care except maybe their families," she says. "When you learn to know a person and they learn to trust you, they confide in you." Naomi, a warm listener and mentor, acknowledges that the women also ministered to her.

Naomi's interest in people who needed a friend included a letter-writing ministry to people on Death Row, such as Capollo, the first man executed in Virginia after the death penalty was reinstated.

After World War II and the Vietnam War, Naomi assisted over one hundred and fifty refugees in finding sponsors and homes. She visited refugee camps in Germany and Austria and saw refugees fleeing Poland. She appealed to churches in the United States to respond to their needs, becoming known to many of them as "Mother West."

After moving back to Virginia in 1974, she served as coordinator of refugee resettlement for the Church of the Brethren in Shenandoah District until her retirement. She still has contact with many of the refugees. Her home décor includes gifts from people around the world who have experienced her love and support.

Naomi has served on the board of Gemeinschaft Home in Harrisonburg, which offers a home and guidance to men who leave prison and try to reestablish their lives in the community. She also helped to establish Central Valley Habitat for Humanity, and has served as a volunteer at Bridgewater Retirement Community and as president of the Community's Auxiliary.

Naomi has preserved historic items from her faith journey, including a towel and basin from early footwashing services. Awards for her humanitarian efforts include the Valiant Woman Award from Church Women United of Harrisonburg-Rockingham County in 1986, and the Shenandoah District Church of the Brethren's Refugee Resettlement Coordinator Citation in 1989. Bridgewater College honored her with an Outstanding Service

CHRONICLES

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Naomi West hosts Ruby Sawin in her living room in Bridgewater.

Award in 1998 and the Ripples Society Medal in 1993.

Naomi West and Carlyle Whitelow, both of Bridgewater, were awarded the inaugural West-Whitelow Award for Humanitarian Service by the Bridgewater College Alumni Association during weekend festivities in 2003. Named in their honor, it will be given annually to celebrate alumni who demonstrate the same caring, serving attitude exemplified by West and Whitelow.

Naomi says, "I really don't think it takes much effort to help folks if we are willing to mind ourselves, to listen to our [inner] voice that says here is a situation where you could make someone happier." Naomi lives what she speaks.

Esther Pence Garber, writing in the February 1987 Messenger, tells this anecdote: "Once while Naomi was on her knees bandaging a sore on a refugee's leg, the man looked down at her and said, 'You are an angel!' Well, Naomi is an angel—an earthbound angel who helps to bind the wounds and wash the feet of the world."

tears and ashes tour planned; register now

A day-long bus tour of local sites of historic interest to Brethren and Mennonites will be available on Saturday, July 17, for \$45. Titled "Tears and Ashes: Civilian Lives in an Uncivil War," it will explore the sites, stories, beliefs and lifestyles of the peace-loving Dunkards and Mennonites who opposed both slavery and war. Norman Wenger and David Rodes, researchers and compilers of *Unionists and the Civil War Experience in the Shenandoah Valley*, will serve as tour guides. A packed lunch will be provided. Call 438-1275 to register.

www.VBMHC.org www.VBMHC.org

FROM THE DIRECTOR'S DESK On the Threshold

Standing on the threshold at the Burkholder-Myers house is a tantalizing experience with the breathtaking panorama to the East and the front porch that invites you to sit and enjoy. But there is also a sense of being caught in a time warp; the living room behind you steps back through time, enveloping you in nostalgia and reflections of days long past while the sights and sounds in front of you leave no doubt that the 21st century is at hand.

These thoughts seem to parallel the development of CrossRoads, with a very different view looking backward and looking forward. In the earliest stages of development, I recall discussions focusing on the role and function of the Center. Initially, attention was given to whether this new organization would create a museum to enshrine the past or an interpretive center to connect past, present and future. The concept of an interpretive center seemed to be broader and to serve a larger purpose, and this direction was taken. But now, as the program continues to develop, an even broader view has taken root—an outreach ministry for visitors who may ponder the Christian faith.

What an exciting time this is! Many things are happening that reflect all the behind-the-scenes work that has been taking place. The entrance is being installed, plans for the Welcome Center are being finalized and restoration of the living room in the Burkholder-Myers House is amazingly beautiful.



While all of these things have been developing according to plan, there have also been a few pleasant surprises along the way—special "bonuses" that have come with this wonderful setting. One of these is the presence of two sinkholes located in the woodland just on the west side of the ridge. The woodland itself is a large and mature stand of predominantly oak trees that provide a wonderful summer canopy. It is easy to imagine all kinds of special events in this quiet and peaceful setting. And the sinkholes have enormous potential to be developed as amphitheaters for dramas, informal Sunday evening worship services, music events, children's stories the list seems endless.

The sense of being on the threshold continues as development of the campus proceeds to the point of being able to open for visitors and have on-site programming begin. When I look back, I see all the time, energy and effort given by so many dedicated volunteers - and then I look forward to the thrill of seeing all of this come to fruition.

And now, we anticipate another threshold with the beginning of a full-time Executive Director. We eagerly anticipate the arrival of Steve Shenk as we usher in a new phase in the continuing development of CrossRoads and our Journeys of Faith and Conscience. Somehow, I think this sense of being on the threshold is going to last for a long time!

Doris Showalter

Doris Showalter, Interim Director

Projects needing your support this summer:

- ◆ Completion of the driveway and parking lot for the Welcome Center
- ◆ Renovation of the Welcome Center, with exhibits, for visitors
- ◆ Continuing restoration of the Burkholder-Myers House
- ◆ Clearing space for an amphitheater in the woods behind the Center
- ◆ Moving the Whitmer Schoolhouse to the CrossRoads site

Call 438-1275 if you would like to volunteer for any of these projects.

_____ I want to share in the legacy of CrossRoads. My tax deductible gift of \$_____ is enclosed.

Name _____ Phone _____

Address _____ City _____ State _____ Zip _____