

During a recent night flight, clouds parted in time for me to see an "old friend." Looking north as the plane passed over Des Moines, I tapped hubby Richard's shoulder and declared, "There's Ames!"

Ames, Iowa. The site of the first LWML Convention I attended, back in 1985.

There were lots of firsts on that trip for that barely 30-year-old. Not only was it my first solo plane ride, leaving behind my husband and then-5-year-old daughter, Elizabeth, it was also the first time I had journeyed west of Buffalo, New York. Another first: being surrounded by thousands of Lutheran women and experiencing "LWML culture."

I slipped into the rapidly filling arena for Thursday night's Opening Worship Service, climbing up a few levels onto the risers. What a vista! I had never seen 10,000 Lutherans assembled in one place, let alone worshipping together!

After the service, women fell into each other's arms, hugging tightly, while others ran to greet long-lost sisters in Christ. I wove my way through the crowd and headed directly outside, heeding the announcement to enjoy coffee on the plaza.

As I stepped out into the starlit night, I realized that I was the first guest to arrive. My eyes spotted the tables appointed with inviting cups of hot coffee (coffee always tastes so good outdoors, doesn't it?), but first there was a reception line of women in pastel gowns — the LWML Presidents! I recognized each of those faces from reading the *Quarterly*; one President, however, stood out to me: dressed in exotic, ethnic attire and wearing one-of-a-kind jewelry was Helen Gienapp.

Helen's name was familiar to me because Mrs. Zimmermann, the mother of a friend who had encouraged the formation of our congregation's LWML group in the late 70s, had often shared with a big smile that she "was a Gienapp."

I met Helen years later in the exhibit hall at the Minneapolis Convention 1999, where Helen staffed the MOST Ministries booth. I recounted our first meeting on that moonlit Ames plaza, describing the details of her unique dress. She told me, in turn, that she also remembered me from that evening. My skeptical "oh-you-say-that-to-everyone" glance was immediately set straight by her earnest smile and her firm, focused eyes, "Oh, yes, I do remember you." During our conversation, I told Helen about my desire to go on a mission trip and picked up a MOST brochure, anticipating a trip to Venezuela the following year, the first of my eight trips with MOST. (On my last mission trip, to Chile, in 2011, Helen's daughter, Karen, and I were teammates.)

The following year, Helen and I shared a few days together (as seat mates!) when I was a guest at the LWML Michigan District Convention. I learned that Helen liked her coffee black and was still an enthusiast for distinctive jewelry. We exchanged impromptu parting gifts: She gave me a colorful enameled cross, and I inscribed to her a message in my GOD'S WORD Bible, which had a custom-made Atlantic District LWML purple cover.

It is said that a person's first LWML convention makes the biggest impression. If the Pittsburgh Convention will be your first, come prepared to be filled with memories ... and friendships that last a lifetime.

Nancy

Nancy Graf Peters, Editor-in-Chief



Nancy spotted in the balcony section at the Ames, Iowa, LWML Convention

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