

# Everything happens for a reason



**Little Pieces**  
Elaine Loring

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It was about 8 years ago and I was recovering from cancer surgery, which left me simply exhausted, so I was sleeping a lot. My youngest son had finished up at Ellsworth and moved away to Colorado to live with my middle son, and I was living by myself.

I had met the Cow Man, but we were in the beginning stages of our relationship, doing our own thing. However, a few months earlier, my middle son had asked me for the Cow Man's phone number because he was having car trouble and needed some advice.

In the meantime, I had been worried about my youngest son because he took the death of his dad very hard. He was floating around in life, not knowing what he wanted to do, which is why he ended up in Colorado, working for a custom wood-working business.

So, it was early in the afternoon during this period of my life, and I was napping. The Cow Man came into my bedroom and woke me up, saying my middle son had just called him and there was an accident. I'm so glad they had exchanged phone numbers. He said my son had been trying to call me several times, but I had left my phone in the other room.

Apparently, my youngest had chopped off some of his fingers while at work.

I threw the bed covers off and was already dressed in yoga pants and a T-shirt. I called my middle son and he explained that there was a work accident, and they were trying to reattach a thumb, and there may be more fingers lost. My youngest was being life-flighted to Albuquerque.

Minutes later, clothes were thrown in a bag and I was on the phone booking a flight. I got a seat on the last plane out of Des Moines to Albuquerque, and as I hurried out the door, I asked the Cow Man to watch my dog

and take care of the place while I was gone.

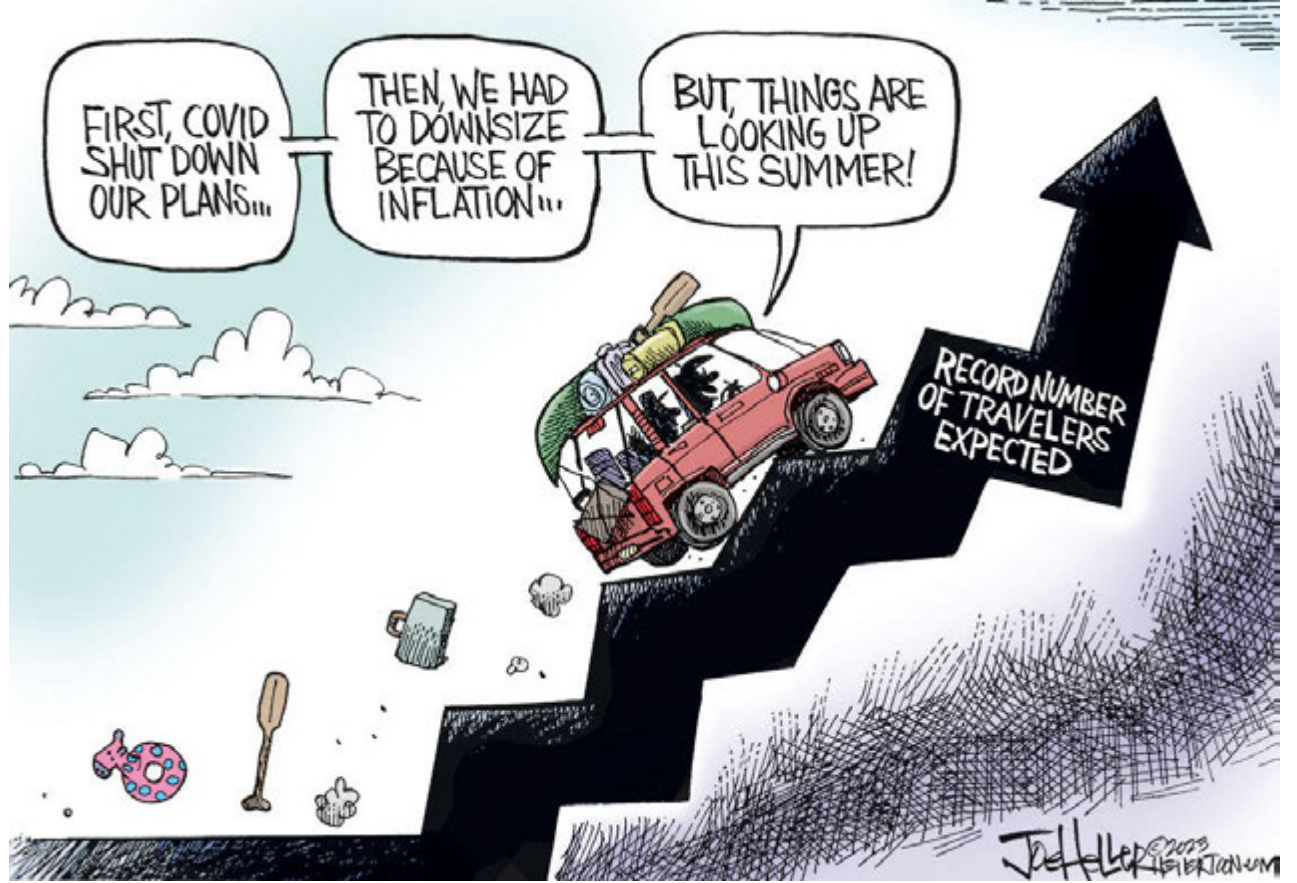
The flight was a blur, but I arrived in Albuquerque and quickly booked a hotel room, then took a taxi to the hospital. My son was in recovery and his hand and lower arm was bandaged. They couldn't reattach his thumb, which was cut off at the knuckle... it would have been stationary with no movement. His other fingers were sliced, but he wouldn't lose them. Apparently, the accident happened right before lunch when he glanced at the clock and in that quick moment, ran a saw right through his glove.

I sat with him for hours and he said, "I'm 21 years old and don't have a thumb." I tried to be reassuring and told him that everything happens for a reason, and we don't know that reason now, but someday we will.

Not long after, he moved back to Iowa and enrolled at DMACC in the drafting program. Before he even graduated, he was offered a job. The summer after he finished his degree, he was off to Iowa City to start a new career.

A couple of years later he met a girl, and that girl will now be his wife. He's never been happier and recently I reminded him of what I said at the hospital in Albuquerque. Everything happens for a reason, and if he had stayed in Colorado, he would have never gone back to school, never got an awesome job, and would have never met her.

When very bad things happen, the best may be right around the corner. I've lived it, and I know I'm not the only one. Everything happens for a reason; we just have to be patient and wait for the answer. ■



# We honored Cameron and remembered Gov. Ray



**Stray Thoughts**  
Randy Evans

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Sue and I were in Washington, Iowa, last month. The purpose for our trip was a high school graduation.

It was a special occasion because the people we joined with in honoring young Cameron, the newly minted Washington High School grad, have been our friends for almost 44 years.

It is important to know that while family and friends gathered to celebrate this milestone in the young man's life, there was one noteworthy person close to the family's heart who was there in spirit, because he truly made this wonderful day possible.

That person was the late Robert Ray, Iowa's former governor, who died in 2018. He is a revered figure in the lives of Cameron's extended family and in the lives of thousands of immigrant families.

Forty-four years ago, on a Sunday morning in October 1979, Cameron's father, Cameron's paternal grandparents and the handsome young man's aunt and three uncles, first set foot in Iowa. A chartered jumbo jet brought them and nearly 230 other immigrants halfway around the world from their former homes in Laos.

Cameron's dad, Tou Vongpanya, was just 4 years old then. Cameron's grandfather, Oth Vongpanya, carried the little boy down the steps from the jet. All the family's

possessions were tucked into one suitcase and one cardboard box.

The Vongpanya family — five siblings, ages 4, to 14, and their parents, Oth and La — was allowed to come to Iowa because Gov. Robert Ray invited war-weary refugees from Southeast Asia to start new lives in this state, in places like Bloomfield, Fairfield and Ottumwa. No longer would these refugees have to fear communists might kill them in retaliation for working for the United States government during the Vietnam War.

Sue was among a handful of Bloomfield residents who greeted the Vongpanyas that morning and escorted them to their new home in Bloomfield. Decades later, the Vongpanya kids still express their gratitude for the way the community rallied around them, finding them a home and stocking it with furniture and clothes, helping Oth line up a job, providing tutors to help the kids learn English, and above all else, treating them with dignity and compassion.

They know the people of Iowa, and Gov. Ray,

gave them a life-changing opportunity — and hope. The Vongpanyas have worked hard since that fateful day in 1979 to be worthy of the blessing this state provided to them.

I am confident Gov. Ray would be proud of what Oth and La and their kids have achieved. All five of the kids graduated from high school. They earned college degrees. They have married and started their own families. They have purchased houses, been gainfully employed, and served in the United States military. They have been on community boards and all are U.S. citizens.

Advanced age kept Oth and La from the celebration in Washington. When you uproot and relocate half a world away, family takes on extra-special importance. So, all five Vongpanya siblings were there in Washington. So were spouses and kids, aunts, uncles and cousins. This scene will be repeated in the coming years, because Tou and his wife, Pam, have two boys younger than Cameron.

The Vongpanyas were beaming over the recent announcement that Gov. Ray's grandson is getting married this summer to the daughter of another refugee who came to Iowa in the 1970s.

The Vongpanya story is as old as the United States. Whether we want to acknowledge it or not, this is a country of immigrants. My own ancestors

came from northern Europe years before the Declaration of Independence was signed 247 years ago. My family eventually settled in the gently rolling hills of Davis County six years before Iowa became a state in 1846.

Although the Evanses have been in the United States for a very long time, my ancestors came for the same reasons the Vongpanyas and immigrants throughout our nation's history have arrived here: We have all wanted safety and security, food for our families, education for our kids, jobs, and a chance for a fresh start so we can live lives that are more secure and a little brighter than our forebears'.

The emotions were palpable that recent afternoon in Washington when the Vongpanyas talked about those times decades ago in Iowa, when Oth worked as a custodian and tended to people's lawns and snowy sidewalks to provide for his family. The kids talked about working hard to live up to their parents' high expectations for them.

Through Gov. Ray's leadership, Iowa welcomed roughly 10,000 refugees from Southeast Asia in the 1970s and 1980s. Before his death in 2018, Ray often said of those immigrants, and it certainly applies to the Vongpanyas:

We are proud of all you have achieved. You have enriched our lives and strengthened our state. ■

# 'Spectacular' events wear on the mind

There was a time when I could read the paper and I loved it. I learned things, I read heart-warming stories and laughed at the comics. It was my time to drink coffee and eat buttered toast. Not today though, the paper and the news have changed drastically.



**Half a Mind**  
Linda Halfpop

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My cellphone has invaded my lifestyle also with miscellaneous sounds that announce breaking news or another mass shooting, even a change in the weather. It's just not healthy to absorb the headlines so frequently.

I am a fan of current events but the "spectacular" has become the norm. It's wearing on the mind and spirit of a lot of us. I can't ignore the world around me; but I also must not let it mess with my head. Can I believe without becoming warped by the wickedness around us? It's like the world is opposed to peace, joy, love...hope. The news of the day does not tend to be uplifting.

I've taken to my books more. I've even watched prank videos that are hilarious. Laughing is so healing. Reading uplifting stories restores my soul. Sometimes the goodness of the world dilutes our lives. I just want to search for the diamonds of humanity that have been buried.

I want to read the comics again. ■

## Ellsworth College Foundation

# Building a firm foundation

Some time back I went to a conference on tourism in the city of Earlham, Iowa, (the H is silent). Now when I say Earlham, I add a lifting of my arms, a kick of my leg and give a whoo-hoo. It is something that someone did at an Earlham celebratory Chamber event, and it stuck, even for us out of towners!

The reason behind going to this conference was to develop and enhance the presentation of a museum and/or historical buildings within a community and how to create a memorable experience. The one thing I learned was it doesn't matter the size of your community, but what you can add to make a memo-



**Guest Column**  
Gwen Groen

*Gwen Groen is the director of the ECC Foundation.*

orable experience.

For the Foundation and its entity Pat Clark Art Collection, we have two 'museum' opportunities to share. The Ellsworth Historical Museum located within the Osgood Library on the ECC campus and the PCAC museum located within the Carnegie-Ellsworth Library Building. Both very different from one another, however, one adds to the amazing legacy of E.S. Ellsworth and his impact on Iowa Falls and

former Iowa Falls resident Pat Clark and her desire to bring the "world of art" to Iowa Falls. Kristie and I, along with our committee boards are working on ideas to improve and create a better experience and adding to the already impressive history of Iowa Falls.

June 12-18th is Iowa Museum Week. This year, we are focusing on the Pat Clark Art Collection and will be hosting an afternoon Tea & Crumpets (well dessert) reception. The event will be held from 2 p.m. to 5 p.m. at the Carnegie-Ellsworth Library Building, 520 Rocksylvania, Iowa Falls. We have partnered with the Iowa Falls-Alden

High School Art Program and their instructor Chelsie Meyer. The students chose the art, placed the art and are the curators of this event.

The reception is free to the public. Please consider attending in support of not only the PCAC, but the high school Arts Program. These students have done an outstanding throughout this project and have shown a valued interest in keeping the arts an important part of the Iowa Falls Visitor and Tourism.

If you have questions regarding the reception please call Kristie Nevenhoven, PCAC Manager at 641-648-8576.

\*\*VC, thanks for reading. ■