PIONEER PRESS TREASURE HUNT

30 years after vanishing, medallion resurfaces

That’s only the start of the mystery around original coins made for hunt

By Jared Kautzman
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They say the identities of the Pioneer Press Treasure Hunt clues are the best-kept secret in St. Paul. But tracking down the life stories of the medallions those writers hid during the hunt’s early decades has proven to be nearly as intractable — and has led to a historic reunion for the Pioneer Press. Earlier this month, an item believed to be an original treasure hunt medallion that was hidden in a majority of hunts between 1969 and 1987 popped up for sale on eBay.

MIDWEST WAR

Netanyahu rebuffs Biden on issue of Gaza control

Israeli PM rejects idea of any Palestinian sovereignty after war

By Julia Freels and Sammy Magdly
Associated Press

JERUSALEM • Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said Saturday that he “will not compromise on full Israeli control over Gaza” and that “this is contrary to a Palestinian state,” rejecting President Joe Biden’s suggestion that creative solutions could bridge wide gaps between the leaders’ views on Palestinian statehood.

In a sign of the pressures Netanyahu’s government faces at home, thousands of Israelis protested in Tel Aviv calling for new elections, and others demonstrated outside the prime minister’s house, joining families of the more than 100 remaining hostages held by Hamas and other militants. They fear that Israel’s military activity furthers endangering hostages’ lives.

Netanyahu is also under heat to appease members of his right-wing ruling coalition by intensifying the war against Hamas, which governs Gaza, while contending with calls for restraint from the United States, its closest ally.

Stillwater Area High School

HEY, FANS: ‘GIVE ME A P!’

School’s adapted cheerleading squad offers a chance ‘for everyone to participate’

By Mary Divine
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Stillwater Area High School’s adapted floor hockey team was leading the Eden/Eden Prairie/Bloomington/Richfield squad 7-3 at the end of the second period. Tuesday night when the spotlight turned to seven young women on the sidelines.

Ruby Noah, dressed in a red cheerleading T-shirt, went first. Ruby held up a large sign with the letter “P” on it and pressed a voice-recording button. “Give me a P!” echoed through the gymnasium. “P” the crowd shouted back.

ST. PAUL » UNIVERSITY AVENUE

Retiring Episcopal Homes CEO ‘knew how to make things happen’

By Frederick Melo
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When Marvin Plakut pitched the Seabury senior housing development, even some of St. Paul’s most die-hard community advocates were taken aback by what seemed like a tall gamble.

“There had been no new housing on University Avenue in 50 years,” said Plakut, who oversaw the opening of the 49-unit affordable-housing community at University and Fairview avenues in 2002, 14 years before the arrival of the light-rail corridor outside its doors. So Plakut, the president and chief executive officer of Episcopal Homes, kept pitching senior apartment buildings along a business corridor that some long-standing commercial interests were abandoning.

Carty Heights, Kings Crossing, the Terrace at Iris Park and more — one after another, each opened their doors to St. Paul’s oldest residents during his 25 years with the organization. Plakut, 69, has announced he will retire at the end of March, and he’ll be leaving the 130-year-old nonprofit senior housing provider transformed.
Marvin Plakut

FROM PAGE 1

A mix of affordable, market-rate senior housing

In addition to expanding its original two properties during Plakut’s tenure, Episcopal Homes added two market-rate and 256 affordable housing units in seven locations in the Twin Cities. The project at University Avenue in St. Paul and the Green Line corridor, which rolled out in 2016.

With middle-income and low-income neighborhoods to the north and pricer areas like Macalester-Groveland and Highland Park situated to the south, University Avenue struck him as the perfect setting to build a mix of affordable and market-rate senior housing on a continuum of both care and affordability, ranging from independent living to assisted living, nursing homes and memory care. An aging client could simply move next door from building to building as their needs changed.

“The key reason was this — stand-alone nursing homes were really struggling. Increasingly, clients preferred organizations where there was a continuum of care,” Plakut said on Thursday. “They need one another. There’s a natural bridge that residents need as their health or frailty fluctuates.”

In the past 25 years, with the growing trend in mind, Plakut has overseen construction of several affordable and market-rate senior housing developments, jump-starting real estate investment in a business corridor that had lost its signature car dealerships and other commercial anchors throughout the 1990s. Where others had given up, Plakut saw opportunity.

“Tough calls in his career, including navigating the COVID-19 pandemic while protecting the most vulnerable population outside of hospital care. A decade prior, he negotiated the acquisition of expansion property that hosted the venerable Porky’s drive-in — a 1960s-style hamburger joint that people had been coming from all over the state to eat.

“Said he. “We got portrayed, to a degree, as the bad guys. We didn’t force them out. The nature of University Avenue was changing.”

And Episcopal Homes has been a key component of that change, adding some 500 new units of senior housing during his tenure. The property that hosted the former diner now hosts the Terrace at Iris Park, 62 units of independent senior housing that opened about a decade ago, just before the Green Line began rolling down University Avenue.

When Plakut became president and chief executive officer of Episcopal Homes in 1999, the organization ran two senior housing developments, Episcopal Church Home and Iris Park Commons, both of them situated along the avenue and within the capital city’s Midway neighborhood.

“Across 25 years, a staff of 100 grew to become a staff of 650. Annual revenue of $4 million became $40 million. And some of the city’s most well-recognized public officials moved in, or moved their parents or in-laws.”

From Porky’s to COVID

Plakut, a former transgender care administrator for HealthEast, had to make tough calls in his career, including navigating the COVID-19 pandemic while protecting the most vulnerable population outside of hospital care. A decade prior, he negotiated the acquisition of expansion property that hosted the venerable Porky’s drive-in — a 1960s-style hamburger joint that people had been coming from all over the state to eat.

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Home to many people

Episcopal Homes has for years housed former Mayor George Latimer and former Ramsey County Commissioner Ruby Hunt, and previously housed the paternal grandparents of St. Paul Mayor Melvin Carter III, including Melvin Carter Sr., a noted jazz musician.

St. Paul Mayor Chris Coleman’s in-laws have called the property home. Former St. Paul Mayor Jim Scheibel and Sue Hague, former chair of the Metropolitan Council, both sit on the nonprofit’s board of directors. Scheibel said he moved his 97-year-old mother into memory care at an Episcopal Homes building just a few weeks ago.

Plakut’s approach to converting Episcopal Homes has been “more than successful,” Scheibel said. “It’s a critical need in the city of St. Paul. It’s been home to many people and will be home to many others.”

“Knowing how to make things happen,” Scheibel added.

The mission has expanded, as well. Episcopal Homes recently acquired the eight-bed Pillars Hospice Home in Oakdale, which offers end-of-life care. It also offers in-home or mobile hospice care to about 50 additional clients, meeting them in private residences, nursing homes or wherever they may be as they approach the end.

Architecture that engages

While developers in some low-income neighborhoods prefer walled-in structures that face away from the surrounding community, Plakut said he always preferred architecture and presentation that sought for greater public engagement.

“It’s not just about enriching lives and building communities with older adults,” he said. “It’s about revitalizing neighborhoods and investing in them.”

Since 2002, a whimsical bus shelter outside the main Episcopal Homes campus at University and Fairview avenues has sported three leaf-shaped metal benches be-neath two giant, fabricated oak leaves, the colorful work of a Minneapolis artist commissioned by the nonprofit.

Interpretation is in the eye of the beholder, but to Plakut, the meaning is clear: “Nature is so big and we are so small.”

It took some convincing to get project partners like Model Cities and the Neighborhood Development Center to back Kings Crossing, a 49-unit, HUD-subsidized senior development that has anchored the corner of Dale and University avenues since it opened in 2011.

Some community advocates balked, wanting to see instead residences that were more high-end constructed over a jazz new restaurant.

But Plakut saw the need for affordable senior housing in Fargotown, as well as ground-level, public-facing commercial tenants that would appeal to local residents with moderate incomes.

Today, the art deco building dubbed Fargotown Square houses both Kings Crossing and everyday vendors like the Los Ocampo restaurant, the Grooming House barbershop, a Subway sandwich shop and the Global Food Market, a small East African-themed grocer.

“It’s the perfect front door to Fargotown,” Plakut said.

Even the Porky’s controversy ended on a bit of a high note in his eyes. After the red-and-white checkered drive-in opened in 1961, it disassembled and relocated to the Little Log House Pioneer Village south of Hastings.

“If I don’t leave now, I won’t get another chapter”

In 1996, Plakut’s wife, Darvia Herold, was moved by a competition in the Pioneer Press that sought written nominations for the male spouse or loved one with the best home cooking skills. She penned the following poem, which found its way into the printed newspaper:

“It’s a man of the nineties, there is no doubt, In General Mills, he should have some clue. He’s a father, a lover, a cook and a cleaner; No one makes a meatloaf that is mean.”

Plakut said his meatloaf is, in fact, nothing all that special, though it kept his three children fed.

As for his next steps, he has no intention of celebrating his retirement years by picking up a golf club, though he does plan to take his wife traveling.

“If we can, the most vexing problem facing mankind is climate change,” he said. “I want to volunteer with organizations that are focused on mitigating climate change. I want another chapter in my life, and if I don’t leave now, I won’t get another chapter.”

McMahon, a former executive of University United, a nonprofit community organization, said Plakut was a pleasure to work with.

“I was one of the first kids on the block talking about ‘transit-oriented development’ in 2000, and nobody knew what I was talking about,” McMahon recalled.

“The accepted vision for University Avenue was what was there: one-story strip malls with parking lot after parking lot. And here comes Marvin Plakut with a multi-story development.”

McMahon said the project was a game-changer. There was still the question, whenever I was out on the stump preaching transit-oriented development, about whether that would be enough.

“That’s what we should be getting — Episcopal Homes.”

“I was also a part of a poster child for what the future of the University Avenue sora, with concentrations in health care policy and non-profit management.

Tom Henry

Tom Henry, a former mental health practitioner and business consultant, received his bachelor’s degree summa cum laude in interdisciplinary studies with emphasis in social work and business administration from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.

Henry also holds a master’s degree in public policy from the Humphrey School of Public Affairs at the University of Minnesota, with concentrations in health care policy and non-profit management.