Interview Description

Pat Zidlicky and her husband moved to Postville in 1994, and shortly after Pat became involved in the Taste of Postville Celebration and the Diversity Council. Pat helped with the Taste of Postville from 1998 to 2006 and fondly remembers the good times as well as the complications of planning an elaborate event and meeting all the food safety regulations. At the time of the interview, Pat Zidlicky was the president of the Diversity Council, a group that hosted educational and community programs. Pat recalled many potlucks, movie showings, and celebrations held by the Diversity Council that were well attended by the Community. Pat discusses her involvement in ESOL classes, English Speakers of Other Languages, and the relationships that formed as she tried to learn a little Spanish while other residents tried to learn English. At the time of the raid, Pat spent time at the Catholic Church and comments on how the community came out to support its residents in that time of turmoil.

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Community Voices: Postville Oral History Project

Interview with Pat Zidlicky

July 28th, 2014, Postville, Iowa

*RaeAnn Swanson: Pat, could you tell me a little about yourself?*

*Pat Zidlicky: I am a Postville resident since 1994, and we moved up here, my husband transferred to a new job position with the Postville Farmer’s Coop. I had formerly worked at Walmart in Tipton and I just simply transferred from Tipton to Decorah. Which was nice to have a job right away. We started out renting houses, and we changed locations three times before we found a house here. That part was interesting, but we met a lot of people in doing that. We ended up in a house we really loved on Springfield Drive.*

*When you were looking for a home, what made you choose Postville?*

*The job location. We had to wait until our third child graduated from high school, because she wouldn’t allow us to move until she completed school. All three of the kids went from pre-K through high school there. Paul found a job at Postville Farmers Co-Op. and I was able to transfer from the Tipton Wal-mart to the Decorah store. At that time, we didn’t know anything about Postville.*

*What was Postville like when you did come here?*

*I think the population was only like 1500. I wasn’t aware, right away, of all the diversity. At that time they had the turkey plant [Iowa Turkey Products] and the kosher plant [Agriprocessors], which employed a lot of people. After the turkey plant burned down, that affected a lot of things. More people moved over to work at Agriprocessors. I couldn’t give you figures of how*
many people were employed, but a lot were and from a lot of different cultures. I think that is how I got interested in the diversity council, because I became aware of all the different cultures like the Russian Ukrainians, the people from El Salvador and Panama. They lumped them together as Hispanics, but they came from so many different countries and areas. The common language was Spanish, so that was a good thing. They all had children and were involved in the school. I’ve always been a lover of languages and different kinds of people, so I hopped right in on the Diversity Council. Taste of Postville came right after that, and I thought that is something I just had to be a part of.

Do you speak Spanish?

Un Poquito. I had two quarters at Iowa State and a couple of quick classes here, but you know if you don’t use it, you lose it. I tried to initiate conversation at work, but could only manage a few words.

What were the classes like that you took here?

It was a brief six weeks is all, but it was taught by a woman that was married to a Hispanic man. She probably speaks it fluently. It was good, it was just too short.

Where was that held?

I think it was at the Multicultural center, I don’t think it was at the school. That’s been a while. [5:00] They really should have that for adults. As much as we have ESL for the immigrants, they should have some of those classes for us. I know they are supposed to learn English, but it wouldn’t hurt us to learn their language as well.

What can you tell me about what is it like to live in Postville now?
It’s changed, but it kind of constantly changes as far as the groups that come in and work. Then they move out and another group comes in. We even had Chinese people here at one time, it wasn’t for very long. Then we had a group of Native Americans and they didn’t stay very long either. We had a group from the island of Palau. The latest group is the Somalis. It’s all interesting, every group that comes in you learn from. And that is thanks to the Diversity Council.

*In what ways has the Postville community dealt with the diversity?*

That’s interesting. Our group [Diversity Council] is 100 per cent for all of it, but the community as a whole, maybe 60 per cent I would guess support it. They might not be against, but indifferent, which is sad to me. Then there is a small percentage that are totally anti-supportive. I would say there is a good percentage, the ones that are involved in school especially, whenever there is a tragedy or an event like the fire at the turkey plant and the most recent car accident involving the Somalis in January 2014, the school just jumped right in and raised money to help out, and our Diversity Council was in charge of the account. We assisted two families with rent for a couple of months. During the turkey plant fire, that was awesome to see the involvement and support, everybody hangs together then and makes it work. They bounce back. It was the same way with the school and after the raid. That was a trauma for sure, but it showed our strength and the community pulling together.

*Could you describe to me the car accident? I think I have heard a little about it, but I’m not sure what happened.*

I will just give you the details the best I know. It involved one car of Somalis, it was a man driving and there were three women. They were all killed. They were coming up the Clermont
hill and there was a pickup truck, with the round bales on the back was coming toward them. They got over the line. It was a day when the weather conditions were really “iffy.” It probably just took a little bit to make the car swerve. I wouldn’t begin to say whose fault it was. It just involved the deaths of those four people, which involved a lot of children and relatives. The school started right away doing fundraisers to help with funeral expenses and whatever was needed. We made it public and then the people in the community contributed too. We set up a regular fund through our council. We distributed the money according to need. We felt that it was [10:00] successful.

*Can you tell me about your involvement with the Taste of Postville?*

That was a big part of my life. Eight years I was involved (1998-2006), and it was a highlight every year. It was lots of work. I was on the staff and I was involved with some of the families. That’s how I got to know these people and some of their cultures, the Jewish, Ukrainians, and there were some from Israel, [like] Nisrine, Hosam, and Amara, that’s another can of worms [because] the husband was involved in the kosher plant and got into lots of trouble. His wife and the family were wonderful people. We had people from Kyrgyzstan, and I think maybe 20 different countries were represented. At Taste of Postville we had all these booths representing the different countries. They would serve food and might dress in their native costumes. It was a fundraiser, they got the profit, but they had to pay for the booth and pay taxes, a lot of things that they didn’t totally understand. The food inspection was the thorn in our side. That was something we couldn’t avoid, but it affected the amount of involvement. It got to be a bigger problem, and then, well we didn’t have it after the raid. You got to taste all these [foods], and it involved music from different countries and we’d have some competitions. It was a great time.
We drew people from all over. Other states. They’d hear about it in the media, publicity via the Internet, and word of mouth. It just got bigger and bigger every year to the point where we just didn’t know if we would be able to handle it all. I remember one year doing a helicopter ride that was just thrilling for me. I loved it. Just flew all around Postville, and they pointed out different things, of course I knew what most of them were. I rode with a man from the Ukraine and I wore a pair of earrings that looked like a globe. He just went nuts over those earrings! He thought that was the neatest things he’d ever seen. I saved those earrings as a memento of that Taste of Postville year. We had so many people that we had to bus them from the fairgrounds up to the main street downtown where most of the activity was. We had to block off the street, and it was a very exciting time. The City Office was very helpful with set-up and tear-down.

What was happening at the fairgrounds?

Parking primarily. That’s where we did the helicopter, we took off from there. There wasn’t any other food or anything down there. It was pretty much confined to Green Street.

You mentioned you got to design that shirt in 1999?

We had a cup and a t-shirt that we designed each year that had the date on it. That is a real special souvenir for me. The whole committee would gather and meet and we would discuss all the things that we had to handle. The hub of this whole thing was Ron and Nina Taylor who now live in Decorah. They were in charge and had all the contacts of people [5:00]. They just knew how to get things done. It was wonderful and everyone worked well together. We had a person in Postville, Tim Bauch, who was in charge of the electrical. Gene Arnburg was instrumental too. That was a monumental job because of the dozens of roasters the length of a whole street. We had to decide who was going to be where. It was very complicated, but very

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capable people were in charge of that. Tim Bauch now lives in Clermont. He works for the Allamakee REC [Allamakee-Clayton Electric Cooperative], very brilliant at his job. Each year we had to add more so he would have to change the wiring. It was amazing, but it always got done. *Could you talk more about the food inspection because that sounded really interesting?*

It was a headache because one gentleman was so particular. I know he had rules and regulations. He would come with a thermometer and it couldn’t be above or below a certain amount. If it was hot it had to be a certain degree, if it was cold it had to be less than, maybe like your refrigerator, 40 degrees. He was a stickler, and that’s a big concern because if we have a whole roaster full of food and you can’t use it, it’s pretty tragic. We had to constantly be worrying about that. And if we would blow a fuse we would have to come up with a replacement. Along with cooking, you had to cook the food in a regulation kitchen. That had to pass inspection as well. So we had two or three places that were acceptable, St. Paul Lutheran Church, Community Presbyterian Church, and the Community Center. It was fun to go around to the different locations and watch them cook. They were just amazing. It seemed so natural for them to cook in quantity. It blew my mind. Then we got to taste too, while they were cooking, what a treat!

*Could you tell me about the cookbook that you helped with?*

It took me probably two years because I contacted the different cultures. A few of them you had to remind again and again and again to get the recipes. Then I had to compile them, and I wanted also to have stories in there related to each culture. Some of their family history and why they came to Postville, and primarily it was for work. Some had more than one family or relatives that were here also. It ended up being successful. A lot of people in the community
thought I would never get it done which made me even more determined to complete it. I had help from the place that printed it in Waukon, Waukon Standard. It was a spiral cookbook, I could give you more details if I had it in front of me. That’s all I will say about that right now. It was fun to do, but a labor of love for sure.

*How did you become involved in the Postville Diversity Council?*

I think it was because the Pastor of the Lutheran Church at that time was [20:00] a member. So I thought I am just going to go some night and see what that’s all about. It was a small group of people, maybe eight or ten. It was a chance to meet new people in the community. I liked what they were doing and I thought this is something I want to get involved with. I started going. I liked what they were doing. Later it got more involved. At that time we had more different cultures to work with. We would come up with educational programs about each of the cultures. We had some really good activities. We tried to involve the community of course, because we wanted to educate them as well.

*Do you remember any of the educational programs?*

I am just looking through the minutes. One of the more recent ones was Luis Argueta, the filmmaker of AbUSEd after the raid, he has now come out with a second one that is not finished yet, but it will be soon [U-Turn]. He has done some wonderful things. We used to have, at what is now the City Hall, a community center, and it was the perfect place for these kinds of gatherings. One was the Postville Diversity Gathering that was held at a park. We had people bring food and we had kid’s activities. We had sharing of different cultural games, activities, holidays, that sort of thing. We wanted to involve them. There is no charge for those events. We would maybe provide the drink, and just get acquainted. We’d have film festivals at this
community center. We did one for the Jewish community. We’d ask them to take part in the program. We had one probably for the Hispanics. When they would complete the ESL classes we would have a celebration, like a graduation. That was always good because it was rewarding for them. We wanted to let them know that we were proud of them. They would bring their families, we would have entertainment there and a speaker. We’d let them speak on their experience of taking the classes. We also celebrated when anyone earned their citizenship. It was always a fun time. That’s just a few that I can think of.

*How does the Postville Diversity Council function? What happens at the meetings?*

We used to meet every month up until the last couple of years, we went to every other month primarily because we weren’t getting enough people to come. The cultures went down after the raid. Usually through the ESL classes, because we worked with them, we would have potlucks from time to time. That worked out really well to get to know the ESL people. Another example is when we had the Chinese here, we did one dinner at the St. Paul Church and that was successful, but like I said they didn’t stay very long. Then the Somali group came and we really had a hard time coming up with a program idea. We wanted to do a program involving their culture, but the only way we did get in touch and connect with them was through the ESL classes. We had a couple potlucks and those were very successful. My working at Walmart, I would see the people come there to shop. They became quite friendly, and I tried to remember names. They wanted to learn the language. All of the immigrants, with the number of hours they work, it was really difficult to find the time and have the energy as well to take the ESL classes. We had good teachers and they were always available, but the involvement and the regularity wasn’t there and it was because of their jobs.
Can you talk to me about how you go about planning events, and if you want to use your most recent, you sure can.

Just two weekends ago we had a Fiesta Hispana, it was for the Hispanic people because we hadn’t done an event just for them. They were overdue because we had done several potlucks for the Somalis. We have two people in the community that were perfect to work on this committee. Blanca Schroeder and Lilia Tinderholt. They are both employed through Headstart and work with Hispanic families. Blanca speaks Spanish fluently and Lilia understands totally. They were very active in planning the event and helping follow through with it. We had that at the YMCA community room, which is the perfect place for group events. It was a potluck. We said to bring food to share, and we provided the drink and the dinnerware, plates and cups. We had a pretty good turn out, we could have used more people, but it was the first time for this event. The response was good of the Hispanics and several community people besides our Diversity Council. All who came had such a good time. They helped with the set up, the tear down, and the clean up. It was a lot of fun, especially the games, the music, and the two piñatas. That was the biggest hit! I just thoroughly enjoyed it and anybody that was there had a really good time.

I’ll take you back in time a little bit. What were your experiences around the time of the ICE raid in 2008?

Well I very clearly remember the day it happened although I was working in Decorah. People that would come in from Postville, would say are you worried about getting home from work today? I would say, what do you mean? They said there are helicopters flying all around, [30:00] police, and roads blocked off. They said there was a raid. Of
course, I had never experienced a raid before so I had no idea how big it really was until I came home. I did not have any trouble getting home. By that time they had taken everyone away, except the partial families that were left. They all convened at the Catholic Church. The poor children that were at school were scared silly knowing that they couldn’t go home to their parents. So it was a very frightening time. I was involved as much as I could be at the Catholic Church just to help out with the food that they needed, organizing things, pulling supplies, and getting the word out of the need that was there. The response was overwhelming, it really was, and that part was a comfort. It lasted a long time. It is so hard to really understand or comprehend what they were going through, these women with the ankle chains, and what the men went through. The government involvement was so questionable, and it just didn’t seem fair at all. They just didn’t consider the language barrier, that was just a small part, but it was inhumane the way they were treated, simply put.

_In your experience how did the Postville community react to the raid and its aftermath?_

I think everybody was pretty shocked and worried about these families. I don’t know how anybody else reacted. I don’t recall any specifics, I just know how I felt about it.

_Were you present at any of the rallies or walks?_

Probably because of my job I was unable to attend a lot of those things, I would have if I hadn’t been working. But I was very supportive of father Paul Rael.

_How do you feel about the media’s portrayal of the Postville community and Postville residents?_

We’ve had plenty of coverage, not just of the raid, but also of the Jewish element. We have a large Jewish population, directly related to the kosher processing plant. We have a synagogue and a Jewish school for the girls and the young children. That used to be the hospital way back
and then it became the City Offices. When the City Offices moved downtown, the Jewish people bought that and use it for a school now. Its still being used that way. [35:00] We were always in the news, whether it was in the positive or negative. There were so many items of interest that the people wanted to know about. We would be in the papers, local, state, and national news even, when it came to the raid and the Jewish issue too. We were on public television. As far as being fair, it just didn’t always happen that way. They would do lots of interviewing and spend hours in the community, and do filming, and filming, and filming. When they did finally create something to put on public television, of course media, and this is a natural thing, they edit and edit. I think it was sad that so little actually was shown, I felt like they didn’t equally represent the whole community.

Have you read any of the books that were written about Postville?

Yes, I purchased them. I can’t say that I sat and read them from beginning to end. Being that I was a fairly new resident of Postville, I couldn’t connect and recognize who they were talking about, where the natives here took offense, especially the Bloom book. We’ve had a lot of good publicity through the Taste of Postville and the educational aspects. Mark Grey from UNI was instrumental in helping the Diversity Council in dealing with the cultures and the education part.

Before you came here, did you have any knowledge about these different cultures that you were eventually going to be exposed to?

No, no I really didn’t. We moved up here from a little community of Stanwood, Iowa, on highway 30, with maybe 500 at most in population. There was no exposure to different cultures. But I have always been interested in languages and different people, so it was a joy to me. I still am happy to be here and a part of this community.

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In the last six years how do you think the community has regrouped?

As far as regrouping, there were quite a few people who thought that Postville was going to fall apart after this raid. Well that didn’t happen. True we lost some Guatemalan people and we lost some Russian-Ukrainian people, but new people came in. The school never seemed to be really affected that badly, because they, just like us, want to have an education. We have a good school. The kids have wonderful experiences there, and they learn how to be unprejudiced. They work together, and there is no “color” involved in the Postville schools. They become friends and they communicate. It’s all good. [40:00] We bounced back from whatever happened. I don’t know how the population has been affected it may have been reduced some, but not terribly noticeable. As far as stores go, the Guatemalans have a couple of stores and the Somalis have a couple of stores. We have a Taste of Mexico that is very, very popular. We have a vintage clothing store that is run by a Russian-Ukrainian lady. The Hispanics have at least one big store. There used to be a grocery store connected with the Taste of Mexico, but I don’t think they do that anymore. I think that half the store is used for dancing and bands that come in on the weekends. As far as churches go, we have all kinds, I think we have 13 churches. I’d say that has been a real increase. We have several Pentecostal [churches]. I don’t know what they all are, but that part is a good thing. I can’t think of anything else involving regrouping.

In case I don’t get to talk to her, could you talk to me a little about Merle Turner?

She is a legend and a philanthropist. She has just been so involved and ESL has been her thing, even until just recently she has been involved in teaching all different cultures. [She taught] quite a few of the Russian-Ukrainians, at one point she had one Jewish young man, and
Hispanics. She might just start out talking with them, and she went as far as some of them going on to college and writing articles for our newspaper. It was a gift, plus she had a lot of time to do that. I was always a little bit envious because I was involved in ESL for several years, and involved with a Ukrainian family that I became very close with. They moved to Florida because the husband got schooling in Waterloo to be in the heating and cooling occupation. That family is down there with a successful business. I have been there to visit them a couple of times. It is very enjoyable and I have stayed in touch, with the extended family as well. I also had two Hispanic families, they were brothers who started out in Decorah. One is still in Decorah and the other family moved to Garnavillo. I followed them there, I didn’t do the tutoring, but we stayed in touch like family. Then they moved up to Whitehall, Wisconsin, and I am still in touch with them. I get invited to birthday parties from time to time. One of my favorite things is the three milk cake, there is nothing better.

*When you say you were involved in ESL, can you tell me what that means?*

At that time it was English as a Second Language, but now they call it ESO or ESOL. I just talked recently to the teachers [50:00] of it because they have changed. Gisella Aitken-Shadle was correcting me on what it’s now called.

*Is it ELL, English Language Learner?*

It could be. Just one second [Pat went to retrieve a note]. ESOL. [English Speakers of Other Languages]. There are the day classes and the evening classes. There are two different teachers. She gave me the revisions on when the classes meet, and so I was going to revise this poster that is up in the different locations in town. Now the program is called HSED, the High School Equivalency Diploma.

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When you were involved in ESL, what did you do?

I got involved with different families, and we got to choose who we wanted to work with. I just talked with them and found out when it was convenient to get together. The Ukrainian family was really pretty good. There were many Jewish women who expressed interest, but you could not get them to come. They did a lot of traveling. I don’t know if it is just part of their culture to not be used to having meetings, the Hispanics too as far as that goes, they don’t know what it’s like to go to a meeting about things, but I never had success with the Jewish women. As much as they were interested, it just never happened. Sometimes I would have time set aside on a regular basis, and they wouldn’t come or they wouldn’t show up, or they wouldn’t call. They didn’t take on the responsibility. So I got frustrated I guess, and I kind of backed out of it. I really enjoyed what I did do. My husband was even involved with a friend of the Ukrainian family I had, that wasn’t for a very long time. It was through NICC [North Iowa Community College]. At first we had to fill out reports about our meetings, what we did and what we covered. They provided a lot of educational material that they wanted us to use. That was pretty good, except that discouraged me, having to write down details. I’d rather just go and discuss what they want to discuss and do vocabulary. So I kind of got away from ESL. They have changed their routine too now. I don’t think it is quite as demanding. I am just glad they are still doing that. They used to charge 25 dollars per person to take these classes too, which was a real detriment for the people because where were they going to come up with the money for these classes? Now they have changed that to where the classes are free, but they have to pay when they do their testing. It’s been good to have a close relationship with the ESL teacher in
Decorah, Jennifer Olufsen. She has been very helpful, and I have tried to help her whenever I could too.

*The classes were through the college, did you have them here or in Decorah?*

[50:00] It was up to us, usually they came to Postville. It was up to us whether we wanted to have our meetings in our homes or in their homes. Usually if they had family they preferred to have me go there. It’s a better learning situation anyway then having them come with their children. That wouldn’t be a good learning environment. Although I really enjoyed that with my Hispanic family, I got to know that young man Manuel from the time he was two or three and now he is sixteen. To watch them change and grow up, it’s very good. Once in a while they would have seminars for the ESL teachers and we’d share ideas and information.

*Did you have anything else you wanted to talk to me about today?*

I could talk for a long time about Taste of Postville because I was involved for eight of the nine years. So much of it is things to look at, that you have to experience it that way. That’s what brings back the memories so clearly to me, keeping those souvenirs. Maybe another time we could talk about that in particular. The Diversity Council is the most important since it’s still going on.

*I guess we will call the recording a day, so thank you Pat for sharing with me.*

You’re welcome. (52:06)