Interview Description

Julie Heitland moved to Postville in 1994 after completing her master’s degree at the University of Northern Iowa. At the time of the interview she worked as the librarian at the Postville School and recounts some of the adaptations the library, school, and community underwent as Postville saw demographic changes throughout the 1990s and 2000s. As a member of St. Bridget’s Catholic Church, Julie is deeply involved in the annual Holy Walk, an event open to the public that occurs in December. In the interview, Julie discusses her role in planning the Holy Walk, teaching confirmation, and participating in religious traditions that were relatively new to Postville like the Posada. Julie was present in the school the day of the raid and in the aftermath at St. Bridget’s.

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Community Voices: Postville Oral History Project

Recollections of Julie Heitland

Based on an Interview taken October 14\(^{th}\), 2014

Postville, Iowa

*RaeAnn Swanson: Can you tell me a little about yourself?*

Julie Heitland: I’ve been married for thirty years. I have two sons, both out on their own. Each one has a child, so I have two grandchildren. My husband works at Cabela’s in Prairie du Chien. One son is married and works in West Union, the other one works in Decorah. We came up here in 1994 because of the job opportunity after I finished my masters. I have stayed ever since.

*Where did you get your masters?*

UNI. [I received my] BA and masters both from UNI.

*It’s a great school, I might be a little biased. What was Postville like when you came here 21 years ago?*

[It was] a small town, that had some immigration in it working at the plant. At that point is was primarily Eastern European-Russia and some of those countries, with the Hispanic. Over time we’ve seen a little bit of a change where the Eastern European influence isn’t quite as strong as it used to be, but the Somali influence is picking up in its place. We’ve had, I don’t know what the last count was, 20 plus nationalities at some point within the district. And it’s still that way.
What is it like being a librarian at the Postville School?

Crazy, hectic. I’m the only one, so I have K-12. Up until this year, I split my time between two buildings, k-8th grade and 9-12th grade. I would do mornings in the k-8th grade building, afternoons in the 9-12th grade building. Last summer because of space issues with our increase in student enrollment they moved everything into one location, the k-6th building. Instead of me traveling between two buildings I stay in one place and one building has to come to me. It’s different. I miss seeing kids and staff in the other building because I don’t get a chance to get over there like I would like. I miss seeing those kids, but you have to do what you have to do.

Increasing population, or increasing enrollment is a nice problem to have in a small district.

Art Heitland: Especially when everyone else is declining.

Julie Heitland: [At the] board meeting last night the final count for this year K-12 was about 675, which was again up from last year.

What does a typical day look like for you?

Depends on the day because we operate on a six day cycle. No two days are ever the same.

Today for example, I had five classes in between 9:10 and 11:40 this morning for skills and checkout and I also had two classes in during that time working on research. So I’m bouncing back and forth between both sides of the room trying to make sure everybody has what they need, paying attention to what they are supposed to be doing, trying to get things checked out, keep things straightened up and organized, know where things are at, know where people are at. The afternoon then was a little more laid back. I had some things that I had been putting off that I just took today and said we’ve got to get this all cleaned up. Tomorrow will be a continuation of today not necessarily with so many kids coming it, but because of all the books
that came in today they now have to go back on the shelf, but that’s part of my process. I have been working with Title 1 teachers trying to get another library set up within the library for Guided Reading materials, so I have been focusing some my time on that, getting that all organized. By the end of the week, hopefully that will be finished so that I can move on to other projects [5:00] on my list. Second semester I will also be teaching an exploratory class to middle school right away at 8:10 in the morning, so that will add to the mix of everything that is going on. It’s what I like to call a revolving door, kids are in and out all day long they come in to read, work on computers, do projects, record videos, and computer repair. Kids are in and out all day long, and I like it.

*In the library do you have many books in different languages?*

I have books in strictly Spanish. I have bilingual books in English and Spanish at various levels. I have bilingual books in English and Somali, as well as strictly English, which is a huge chunk of my collection. I do have those resources for those kids that like them. The English kids are checking out the bilingual books because they are on topics that they are interested in, mainly cars. They are reading back and forth. I said *read what you can, the story’s the same.* I am glad to see that they are being utilized not only by the Hispanics reading the Spanish, but by everybody.

*How have you seen the school change over the years?*

Students coming with little or limited English and finding a way to teach them not only the content that they need to get for that grade level, but also teaching them English. We have three teachers on staff in the K-6 building who teach ESL (English as a Second Language), we have one teacher in the High School that teaches ESL, and we have a migrant teacher that
works with the migrant students helping them write homework. Some of our students fall into both of those categories, and so they get ESL time, they get migrant time, they get whatever time with whoever they need. We have a summer school program open to everybody. We encourage everyone to attend. We have a feeding program in the summertime. We run three different session in the summer from the minute school is out up until school starts. These summer sessions allow students to come in and learn, get additional help and get caught up. That has happened probably for the last ten years. [It was] kind of in place a little bit before the raid, but it really kicked off after raid when we knew that kids were going need extra attention. Trying to get them up to grade level with their peers is quite the challenge, and still maintain content in their grade level classroom. It’s a challenge, but its fun. The kids are willing to learn, they want to be there. They will push themselves and in the process they are pushing you. Because they’ll come in and say, I want some more like this,[I’d say] well I don’t have any more like that, but try this one. They are pushing themselves which in turn pushes the staff. They are very loving. They will come up every day and give you hugs. They’ll greet you every morning and say goodbye to you every night. They walk into my room and the first thing I do, if I’m waiting for the whole class to come in, is many of them come by and either [give you] high fives or hugs. It makes my day. I stand up at the top of the hall by the office when they are coming in for breakfast. I greet them all when they arrive in in the mornings. I love it.

*What does the summer program look like?*

Usually runs just in the morning, they come in at about 8:00 o’clock for breakfast. It’s totally free. We feed them breakfast, then from 8:30 to 11:30 they are in the classroom working in...
small groups with teachers, usually on reading and math. That’s kind of our focus in summertime, reading and math, with different activities. Sometimes we’ll have a P.E. option or we’ll have an art option or we incorporate that into other things going on. Then at 11:30 we feed them lunch and we send them home. We do not bus. [10:00] If they want to be there, they have to get themselves there. We run probably about 150 kids every day, all summer long. Because they want to be there and the parents want them there. The k-6 program operates this way. The 7-12 program operates a little differently. There are two different programs for 7-12. There is the migrant program, which attends all summer, and there is also a credit recovery program that runs for three weeks. They get three weeks to complete work that they did not complete during the school year.

*That’s a busy summer. Could you talk to me a little bit about the organizations that you are involved with?*

The basic organization that I am strongly involved with, this is probably my 7th or 8th year, is the Holy Walk. The first one was held in 2009, and we started the planning process in about 2007. We ask people to be characters. We go out to the Lull’s Park walking trail, out by the swimming pool. We have seven to ten stations set up. People walk the quarter mile trail and stop at the different stations and learn the Christmas story. It’s all outdoors, and regardless of weather, whether it’s 40 below [with] a foot of snow, we go. We get a lot of people to attend. We probably have between three and four hundred attendants every year, and it’s never the same ones. You get those that come back every year, but a major share of them are first time attendees. We put characters in costume, and they play their part as if they are living in the times. We get many kids involved with playing some of the different characters as well as adults.
Since this is about our eighth year, the planning process is getting shorter and shorter. Instead of spending all year trying to get things lined up and deciding what we are going to do, we have shortened in down to four months. It’s a busy four months. We hold the walk on the first Sunday in December from 5:30 to 7:00. You are led through the journey by a guide who is the head of the family. You all interact with the characters. You get to experience the whole story of Mary and Joseph on their journey to Bethlehem up through the birth of Jesus and meeting the wise men. It’s an amazing story.

_Could you run me through the planning process?_

Well we just started our planning process in September this year. Since we’ve held the event six times, we have all our costuming and most of our buildings that we reuse from year to year.

Our big thing right now and from this point on will be getting people to be the various characters. We are going to shorten it up this year [2014] to an hour and a half instead of two hours, with the hopes that people will agree to participate the whole time instead of trying to split it in the middle and switch characters. We only have enough costumes for one shift. In order to switch characters out, the second shift goes to the station, a stop on the journey, and they need to switch costumes as quick as possible before the next group arrives. We run into some issues with that. It’s usually cold so we’re working on ways to keep hands and feet warm. Especially for those staying in one place all night, like Mary, Joseph, the angels, and the shepherds. Those that move around like the guides or the soldiers stay warm. [15:00] We do have fire pits around at every station so they have a chance to warm up between groups. For the kids that are involved, they receive service hours for either confirmation or school. They help set up, the day before of earlier on Sunday and when the event ends they help us clean it
up. For every hour they help I give them a little extra because I appreciate the help. The kids love it. I’ve already talked to some of the kids about it and they are looking forward to it. We have everybody who wants to take the journey meet at St. Paul’s Lutheran Church and we bus them over to the park and back, because parking around the park is at a premium. We provide the busing and a warm ride down and a warm ride back. A meal or refreshments are usually available at the church. Everything is free-will offering. We usually come out pretty well with donations because people are impressed with what we have done. We are slowly branching out to the neighboring communities and getting help and participation for this event. The word is starting to spread. Every year we get some body that says ‘well how long have you been doing this?’ We tell them, [and they say] really I’ve never heard of it before. We’re slowly branching out to the neighboring towns and then hopefully out from there a little farther. It’s a slow process. We have considered every other year, but some have said it’s became a Christmas tradition, they look forward to it every year. We consider the weather forecast for the night. The first year we had a foot of snow about two nights before. We had to clear the path so nobody would slip and fall. The second year the wind was out of the North and it was bitter cold. We’ve had to put some safeguards in place. If it’s going to be this temperature, we are not going to put people out and risk their health or their safety. It’s an adventure, it’s fun.

We set up on Saturday afternoon, finish up on Sunday afternoon, run Sunday night, and tear it down Sunday night 5:30 to 7:00 pm and make sure it’s all put away. It’s a long and tiring weekend, but it’s a rewarding weekend. The trail is lit with either luminaries or rope lights all the way around because there are no streetlights or anything around the park, or around walking trail. Everything is lit with luminaries or rope lights, and the fire pits. The guides carry a
lantern lit with kerosene and each station has a lantern. It’s kind of nice. The last couple years we haven’t had any snow and so the park has been kind of dark in my opinion. The first year of the walk, the parl was all done with luminaries. With that foot of snow and the park just glowed.

Art Heitland: It was beautiful.
Julie Heitland: it was beautiful. That was probably my favorite year, with that foot of snow and the luminaries just glowing off the snow. There were luminaries on both sides of the trail and the little bit of haze in the air made it gorgeous. I loved it. We did do a DVD the second year and I don’t know if there are any of those left or not. I don’t have mine right now, I’ve loaned mine out.

Art Heitland: We did mugs one year.
Julie Heitland: That was the second year. That was the same year as the video.

Art Heitland: And we have t-shirts.
Julie Heitland: We are trying to sell out the last of the t-shirt, so if anyone is interested we are taking donations. Or buy one get one, we are trying to get rid of those.

Do you want to talk a little bit about your involvement at the church?

[It’s] been a long involvement. I got asked to be the church organist when our guitar player was going to have shoulder surgery. I was also asked to come on Friday nights for [20:00] choir practice with the Hispanic Choir where I met both of my best friends in town as they were a part of that choir. So it grew from me just playing the English mass to me doing the English and Spanish mass of which I understand very little, because I don’t speak Spanish. I can pick up key words, but for the most part, I don’t understand much Spanish, I don’t speak it at all. It went from me just filling in for a short time to me becoming a permanent organist accompanied by
two guitars. Now it is one guitar and the organ and it’s to the point where if the guitar is not there, I can’t play because I rely on that guitar. I still do English and Spanish so sometimes I am there Saturday night and Sunday morning, sometimes I am there for two masses on Saturday night depending on the rotation. I have kind of been adopted into the Hispanic community whenever they have things going on especially with their Kermés, Posada’s, and Our Lady of Guadalupe and other celebrations they have going on at the church. They adopted us to help them out and be honorary members of their community. They pretty much come and ask questions if they aren’t sure on something. If there is a party somewhere, birthdays, baptisms, baby showers, or graduations, they make sure we are invited. I have been teaching the Faith Formation classes, this is probably my 11th or 12th year. I did not start with the Confirmation class, I started with the 7th and 8th graders. About seven years ago I moved up to the Confirmation class because they needed a Confirmation teacher. That was an interesting experience. This is my third class that spans two years and it is my connection to the high school kids because I am not in their building any more. It is fun to watch the kids grow from I don’t want to go to church, I don’t really want to be here to being active and participating members that really do understand what their faith is all about. I have freshman and sophomores this year, next year when they are sophomores and juniors they will be confirmed. Then I’ll start the process all over again. It’s an hour a week, on Wednesday nights from 7:15 to 8:15. We have some fun and we have little bit of seriousness. Last year after my kids went through confirmation, God’s Not Dead came out, they made all the arrangements, got all the permissions from the Faith Formation Coordinator, and they came to me and said we’re going to the movie.
What was that?

The movie God’s Not Dead. They came to me and said we’ve talked to the Faith Formation Coordinator, we’ve got all the permission slips, we’re going to the movie. They did the exact same thing with Heaven Is For Real. We went and saw two movies after they were confirmed last year because they took the initiative to ask. Two years before that they have would never even considered a Christian movie, that’s how much they have changed in two years. I was proud of them. Most of them I see in church every weekend. Actually the girls, I had three girls and three boys, are all teaching Faith Formation classes to younger students right now during the first session from 6:00 to 7:00 pm. They stay for the second session to attend their own class. That’s neat to see too.

Art Heitland: You also took them to that one conference.

Julie Heitland: I have taken them to Waterloo to youth rallies. I took three students in 2011 [25:00] to Indianapolis to NCYC and that was an amazing experience as well.

What is NCYC stand for?

It’s the National Catholic Youth Conference held at Colts stadium and nearby convention center with High School students from across the United States with people from Hawaii and Alaska in attendance. At that one we had 23,000 people, students and adult chaperones, in Colts stadium. We would start in Colts stadium with a keynote speaker and then go across the street to the convention center for various breakout sessions and finish up the day back at Colts stadium. It opened on Thursday night, all day Friday, and all day Saturday with a closing mass. It was an interesting experience, and I recommend that they attend if possible. It’s every other year, so
the next one will be a year from now in November of 2015 and I already have two that are interested in going.

Does the school require its High School students to have service hours?

The option is there, it’s not a graduation requirement. Freshman are asked to do 10 hours, sophomores do 20, juniors do 30, and seniors do 40. I don’t know if they have changed this, because there was some talk about changing it. 40 hours makes them eligible for the senior trip and 50 hours gets them a gold cord to wear around their neck at graduation. The 10 hours you do as a freshman doesn’t roll over. You have to do 20 hours the next year, so by the time you are a senior you are doing 40 hours. It’s a good program. I put out an email the other day to kids I’m having a book fair next week and I’m looking for kids who want service hours. A couple of them volunteered right away and another one came back and said do I get paid? I said no, its service hours you work for free. They will all work for money, but to get them to do something for the good of the community, for the good of the church, just to be the good citizen, is not like it used to be. They all have the mentality of what’s in it for me? Instead of the mentality that I am going to do it because it’s the right thing to do.

Where are they able to volunteer their time?

At school helping out with athletic events, fine arts activities, ect. For junior high football they’ll maybe be on the chain gang. If it’s a volleyball event or basketball event, they’ll be running the clock and those kind of things. There are lots of opportunities around school. All the churches typically have things going on where they’re asked to help. I tell my kids, because you need so many hours at church for Confirmation and you need so many hours at school, make it count for both, you can count it as church hours and school hours. I don’t care,
I’ll sign off on both places, doing one thing. Going out and just even working for free for somebody thats not a family member counts. Some of them would go out to the shut-ins and rake the lawns or shovel sidewalks, doing food baskets, or going to visit the shut-ins, or going to visit the nursing homes. There are several opportunities for them to get their service hours completed. They just have to want to do it. Like I said, I threw it out there to 7-12 grade and I’ve got about two people that have answered me out of 300. I do what I can, I offer it.

When it come spring and they’re all saying I need hours and I’m like you know what I offered last fall and you didn’t take me up on it.

You mentioned earlier, when you were talking about playing organ at church, some of the events you were invited to [30:00] and I didn’t quite catch what they were called.

A week from Friday they are putting on a Kermés, I would consider it like a buffet type thing. Its put on by the Hispanic community, they bring in different kinds of native foods like they’ll do enchiladas, tortillas, and flautas. The menu is substantial with many options. You can buy individual goods and taste. They hold this event every October and I help out with it. They do a Posada in December which is usually the Friday before Christmas, it is an indoor journey of Mary and Joseph looking for a place to stay. [Cell phone rings] Its done in doors. I think when it is done in Mexico they go from home to home. Here we do it at church and we set up various stops, making it look like a home. The person says go away there is no room. They keep chasing them away for nine nights and the ninth night they are invited into the home for a big party. We have food and games that night. Our Lady of Guadalupe is another big celebration on the 12th of December. They carry the Blessed Virgin statue from Taste of Mexico Restaurant along the sidewalks back to St. Bridget’s. We have mass and food afterwards. If there happens to be a
baptism at the Spanish mass, we are usually invited to go eat afterwards. We get invited to birthday parties, graduations, you name it. I like the food, and I’m game to try new things, as long as it is not too spicy. I have my favorites and when they serve them, I eat them.

How have you seen Postville as a town and as a community handle the diversity that is here?

I have always seen it as being very welcoming. I’ve heard about the different clashes occurring, but I have not personally seen that. The teachers at the school are all very welcoming, putting in extra hours finding ways to help the students be successful. When the raid happened we became very protective of our kids. We would not let them go home that night until somebody, a parent or family member, came to pick them up or we knew somebody was at a specific location and we took them. The raid happened on a Monday, every night for that week, after we had taught for eight hours, we went down to St. Bridget’s church and helped serve supper and helped the students keep up with their school work. We made sure they had blankets and pillows to sleep and whatever else they needed. We had people from neighboring communities bringing in food and coming to help serve. After that week, about once a week during the summer we had a community meal with different groups coming in and serving the meal. The community just pulled together and did what we had to do. You saw quite a few people leave, but the community was very supportive of the women that stayed but had to wear the ankle bracelets. [35:00] We protected our kids. Some left, but they have come back because they want to be here. Kids move in and out all the time. They’ll go to Cascade, they’ll go to wherever, its not long and they are back, because they don’t feel like they fit in anywhere else except here.

I have heard the same thing about the Somali community. They come from Boston and Minneapolis to live here. Why would you come from a big city to small town Iowa? Because
they know they are going to be welcomed. The kids love it. The kids play soccer, basketball, football, and wrestling. They all blend together. They work and play together as a team. There are no issues. I like to tell people we are a mini United Nations and if everybody in the world could live the way Postville does there wouldn’t be any war, everybody would live in peace, because we do live in peace. We have nationalities from all over the world. We at one time had people here from Palau. I know there are people here from the Philippines, Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador, Nicaragua, and other Latin American countries as well as Eastern European, Russia, Ukraine, Kazakhstan, just to name a few. They are homeowners and they are productive members of the community. They all have jobs and they work probably harder than we do. Its nothing for them to work 10-12 hours a day at a job. The older children are the caretakers of the younger children. I see many high school kids bringing in younger siblings in the morning because mom and dad are already gone to work and picking them up after school to take them home or picking them up from the after school program to take them home because mom and dad are still working. I know some students also need to work to help support the family. Unfortunately something has to give, often they end up dropping out of school. They are intelligent, artistic kids. Their art skills are phenomenal. I love to watch them draw. The Somali girls will have what looks like tattoos all over their arms, but it’s hand drawn and it’s not permanent. They’ll wash it off and draw a different design, but it looks like a permanent tattoo because it is done in ink and it’s gorgeous. I love the colorful dresses the girls wear. We have a Diversity Celebration where all the cultures come together and do dances, sing, and share information about their culture. The first year the event was held in the auditorium. Our auditorium seats 450 and it was standing room only. Last year we moved it in the High School
gym and it was full. I haven’t heard anything about the planning for this year, but I am willing to bet it will be full again and possibly be more than one night. You have people coming from Minneapolis and everywhere else to participate and share their culture. Its fantastic. Its an hour and a half to two hour program of people sharing about their life. The filipino group will do a dance, the Somali students will sing their national anthem and do a dance. Some will do solos, while some will do group things. We have, in amongst all of our diversity, three foreign exchange students. One from Germany, one from the Netherlands, and one from one of the Russian countries. They blend right in. Our soccer team last year had Somalis, Hispanics, whites, all playing together as a team. All athletic teams are the same way, [40:00] supporting one another as friends do. Our kids don’t see difference. if someone is new oh well, bring them into the fold, that’s my new friend. They don’t see the difference in dress, color, or language. It’s amazing, to see an American kid holding hands with a little Somali girl because they are best friends. Last year we had several students lose their mothers or family members in a car accident, the district pulled together and raised money for those students to help them be able to stay here with extended family, it was not a question. The kids came up and asked can we do this, can we do this? Its not coming from the staff telling the kids you have to do this, its coming from the kids because they are their friends. They pull together. Today I had a little Somali boy, he was messing around so I pulled him to the side I said stay here with me well he didn’t want to do that and I said well then, stay with me for a minute and we’ll both go back. Another little Hispanic girl as she was coming in, needed a hug and got a hug. Smiles are on their faces every morning when they walk in the door because they want to be there. I would miss it if I wasn’t up there, I really would.
Have you participated in any other events like the Diversity Celebration over the years?

I have been to both Diversity Celebrations. My participation was as the videographer. There is a Diversity Council in town, but I have not been a part of that. The only thing that I can really say I have been a part of is with the Hispanic community through the church. Other than that all of my participation has been through the school. Right now we have translators on staff. In the office we have a Hispanic translator and a Somali translator, who just left to go to school and we are in the process of finding another, translates worksheets, translate letters, calls parents and answers phone calls to translate for those parents that need assistance. Students are very good about helping their parents by translating for them. They watch out for another. Just as I would watch out for my kids making sure they are getting the best, the students are watching out for their parents making sure they are not being taken advantage of because of the language. Its nice to see. We have several students who have graduated high school and gone on to college. Not just at junior college, one in his second year at Luther. A 2014 graduate and his brother who graduated several years ago, are both at the University of Iowa. They have big dreams and they are here to fulfill those dreams. Some may go back and try to improve things in their home country, which is understandable. Some are here because, especially the Somalis, because they are refugees. They have had a long, tough road being in refugee camps and being relocated and relocated, and they are here to stay.

How have you felt about the media’s portrayal of Postville over all these years? [45:00]

I don’t know that we have always gotten the positive side. Anytime something negative happens the media are usually here. Anyone outside the local area usually doesn’t hear about the good things that happen. In some ways I think we are okay with not being in the spotlight.

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We want to be able to do what we know how to do for the citizens in town. We know what's going on and we know what's good. Every town is going to have their bad. If you watch the news, if something bad happens, boom they are there. If something good happens, maybe they’ll get there. For the Holy Walk we did get a little bit of publicity in the newspaper, but we had to work at it. The minute something bad happens or negative happens the TV crews are here or on the phone and wanting to know the scoop. We sometimes feel that way with our athletic teams too, that we never get a break from the officials. It always goes the other way, goes against us. I know people that when they leave they will say I’m from Decorah or I’m from Waukon or I’m from near Decorah or Waukon. They won't actually say they are from Postville. Be proud of your hometown or wherever you grew up or moved. Be proud of it because it’s come a long way. I’m not saying we don’t have things to work on, every town does. We are doing the best we can with the funds we have available. We have had Hispanics and the Jewish community represented on City Council and on school board. They are represented on all the boards and things around town. They have a voice just like everyone else. We have some strong, passionate leaders in town and they will speak up. We’ve all kind of learned to live with and accept each other’s holidays, habits, and ways of life. There are many of amazing people living here. I can travel the world and not leave town. I can talk to people and learn about their cultures without spending any money to experience it. To me it’s great. I graduated from a 3A school that was all caucasian. When I went to college, my first experience with anything other than caucasian was a real shock. I went to Kirkwood two years where I had my first experience with African Americans. When I went to UNI my first roommate was an African American. My second roommate was a Jewish girl from Chicago. Those experiences prepared me for here. I
trust everybody. There is a fair amount of traffic that goes up and down this street to the school and to the apartments and people that walk to work on this street. I’ve never had a problem with trash or anything, because when they are walking by I talk to them. I want to get to know who you are. Our neighborhood consists of Hispanics, caucasian, Somalis, Russians, and a Jewish family.

Art Heitland: Some Somalis, I think, two houses down.

Julie Heitland: There’s not a Hispanic corner, Somali corner, or a Jewish corner of town. They are all intertwined and all living together. When you get to your bigger cities you don’t see that. You have your little communities within the bigger community. We do not have that here. You stop and talk to them, you help them out.

I am going to take you back to the time around the raid. What was Postville like around the time of the raid?

I think up until May 12, 2008, there was probably some resistance to accepting the cultures and the blending. You had the little pockets of nationalities that weren’t necessarily as invested in the community as homeowners. They were somewhat reluctant to be too involved because a many were not legal at that point and we knew that.

Art Heitland: A lot of us didn’t really intermingle with them either.

Julie Heitland: We didn’t really intermingle. Everybody took care of themselves. After the raid you saw everybody support one another. The Jewish workers from Agriprocessors would bring meat to feed the people taking refuge at the church. At the rallies that we had afterwards, we all walked the same streets together as a united front for immigration reform. We all wanted the same thing, so we all walked together, we all sang the same chants, we all sang the same
song, we had prayer services together. The churches all came together and helped each other out. I think that, while the raid was not a good thing, it brought the town together and it didn’t go back to the way it was. We stayed a united front. Young people became more involved and took pride and ownership of their education, their community, their family.

*What was the school like the day of the raid?*

A mess. We were trying to get in touch with parents. We had heard the helicopters flying around. [55:00] Kids were getting phone calls saying *hey there is a raid, stay where you are.* We would not let anybody leave, white or otherwise. When the high school kids had to go to lunch in the elementary building we escorted them across. We did not let anybody go outside without an escort or for recess. The students whose parents worked at the plant, especially the immigrant kids were all gathered together. They leaned on one another, cried together, tried to get ahold of parents or somebody that knew what was going on. At the end of the school day we took all the kids to the auditorium to explain what had happened. The middle school students had heard what was going on. The elementary were protected from it as best as we could until the end of the school day. We kept hearing the helicopters fly over. This was two weeks before school was out for the summer. In the fall, when kids came back to school, and they heard the lawn mower outside the window they would be terrified. They thought it was the helicopters coming back and there was another raid. It took a long time to get the trust of the children back. They did not understand that the school was a safe place and that we were not going to let anything happen to them. The week following the raid, we would stop at the church with the bus and pick up the children and bring them to school. It was a very somber day. You did what you could to comfort the kids while continuing on keeping as much
normalcy as possible for the kids sake. Everybody helped out. If you had a prep period you were in assisting the students trying to get in touch with their parents. You just did what you had to do that day to console the kids, to do whatever you had to do.

Art Heitland: families were literally torn apart.

Julie Heitland: The church became their safe zone. Luther College came down with a bunch of college students. We took computers to the church to help Luther College and others process paperwork which involved getting a list of names of those that were taken and detained at the Cattle Congress in Waterloo, getting copies of legal documents, etc. That probably went on for most of the week. Some of the women were afraid to speak up and say they had young children at home. As a result they were jailed and deported, leaving their children behind. If they did speak up and say they had young children at home they were forced to wear ankle bracelets and were not allowed to work or leave town. They were told those ankle bracelets would be for a short time, but some wore them for up to a year or more. Some of them experienced severe burns on their ankles from the heat of the battery as it was being charged, but they couldn't take them off. During the summer months we didn’t know how many would leave. Surprisingly most of them stayed, or they left and came back for school in the fall. The majority of those kids were born in the United States. They have dual citizenship. The United States and their parents’ home country. [60:00] Its been an interesting process of helping families through the immigration process of their paperwork complete to obtain a green card or permanent status so that they can go to college because they didn't have the right paperwork.
Did you participate in any of the marches? I know you mentioned at least one.

Yes I did. I think I walked in two of them, one right after and then one a year later. I did not participate in the five year one in Cedar Rapids. I was a part of the church services as I was involved in the music. TV cameras were everywhere.

You kind of talked about this a little bit, but in the six years since the raid how has Postville regrouped?

I think you have seen a change in the people that are here. They are more willing to be involved in things. There is not much housing available in town as it is being purchased by various people to establish residency. The mayor is a strong supporter of doing what's right and what's best for Postville. He is not afraid to speak up, he knows how to get things done and he is not afraid to go after it. All nationalities have businesses downtown for people to shop. Its not all American downtown, its the world. You can experience the food of all at the various restaurants. [65:00]

In my opinion, Postville, without the immigrants, would be a dying town. The school would not be able to continue as an independent district. Approximately 50 per cent of our school population is other than caucasian. I know there are people who opt to open enroll their kids out, because they don’t want their children to attend. You are depriving your children of a wonderful opportunity. Today's young people are the world changers and it is going to be up to them and the people from here to make that happen. If we can live in peace and all get along, then so can the rest of the world. They just have to look here and see how its done. Our sign outside of town says “Hometown to the World.” Yes we are “Hometown to the World” and we will welcome them all. I don't care where you are from, come on in.

Do you have any hopes for the future of Postville?

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I would like to see the town grow and expand. The school is part of that, it is growing. We did some realigning this year because we needed more space due to the increased enrollment. We have no extra classrooms available. We have added staff to keep our classes small. Our current second grade class has 70 students. Many of the other classes in K-6th building have approximately 50-60 students. We are a growing district.

Art Heitland: Now we have three sections instead of two.

Julie Heitland: With three sections of everything K-4. Fifth and sixth grade are still in two sections with about 25 students per section. [70:00] We took the 7th and 8th grade out of the elementary building and moved them into the high school building requiring the need for extra classroom space. We’re adding staff to meet the needs of the students and I would like to see that continue. Your smaller districts are going to look to Postville for options to help their district stay viable. We are one of the few districts of our size in the state with increasing enrollment. We have kids open enrolling. We’ve added athletic programs such as soccer and cross country to allow the students a chance to play the sports they grew up with.

Do you have any closing comments today or something we didn't talk about?

If I were to chose to go somewhere else to work, it would be very hard for me to leave. I have thought about it, but I like it here. I like the community. [75:00] I try make all the home athletic events, music events just to show my support for the students. I watch them grow up from Kindergarten to graduation. I like to watch them grow up and mature and become the person that I know they can be.

Well I think that probably wraps it up for tonight, so thank you so much for talking with me.

You’re welcome. [76:17]