

IOWAY Pasadena Adventures

New Year's Day! I don't know how it is for you, but for me it is a nostalgic time. Each year, we quietly say goodbye to the past year and lay aside all its memories. I usually take time on that last day to mentally go over what happened as the days and weeks of that year unfolded. There are always good times to ponder and always some that don't qualify for that category. I trust it is the same for you. Those events of the past year are now filed in the history folder under the unchangeable section. The only change that can be made might be our forgetfulness of some of those times as our flow of years relentlessly marches onward.

The clock strikes midnight. Musical vibrations of an old familiar tune reach our ears, while horns blow, streamers burst forth, everyone kisses, and we find ourselves thrust into a new year. It has magically become New Year's Day and many times relief and excitement sweep over me. We all get to start over on a brand-new adventure, one that is for the most part, of our own making. For me at least, there is a sense of optimism as the days of the new year lie in front of me. My job now is to fill in those days with exciting and meaningful activities. As daylight of that new morning sweeps across the land, I awake and quietly begin the task, determined to somehow do better than last year.

New Year's Day has taken on new meaning for me over nearly the past two decades. I have not kept track of the actual number, but at least a dozen times in the past seventeen years, I have celebrated New Year's Day with a million of my closest friends! What? Is that a misprint? That sounds like the party of all parties, but it can't be true. Nobody has a million close friends. Okay, I have to admit part of that isn't exactly right. They were not all my close friends. In fact, I did not even know most of them, but they were there nonetheless. As the eastern sky brightened on the first day of every new year, I was sitting on Colorado Boulevard in Pasadena, California, in position to enjoy perhaps the greatest celebration of all time and mark that first day of the new year. Yes, you guessed it. My wife Ellie and I, and our new friends, the newly formed group of Ioway Petal Pushers, were there to watch the annual, world-famous Tournament of Roses Parade in Pasadena, California. Take my word for it, there is no better way to begin filling in the days of a new year than to be sitting on a chair with your feet on Colorado Boulevard watching the granddaddy of all parades come past!

While many millions around the world watch this famous parade on TV, there are actually an estimated million people present along the famous five-and-one-half mile route down Colorado Boulevard. It is really the party of all parties. It begins the last day of December, about midday, when people start moving onto the sidewalks to camp overnight and hold spots for friends and family who will join them for the parade. Many

times, I have driven down Colorado Boulevard and watched the beginnings of the party take shape. It is a sight to see. People pitch tents, cook food on grills, sleep in sleeping bags and party into the night as the sidewalks fill with people, all in anticipation for the parade the next day.

Many store owners along the sidewalks board up their windows as protection, not from vandalism, but from the crush of people that will fill the sidewalks along the parade route. Viewing bleachers are set up in the days preceding the parade in many places along this famous route. People pay good money for these seats and are sandwiched in like sardines in a can to watch the parade. Some buildings with flat roofs also accommodate parade watchers who, no doubt, have connections with the owners to get these rooftop seats. Later, I will share how the Petal Pushers get their amazing seats every year.

I am amazed that in all my years of being part of this throng of people, I have never seen any violence, fighting or disorder. Everyone seems to be in a good mood as this event unfolds. There are police in groups of two or three that walk back and forth along the route before the parade begins, but I have not witnessed any confrontations. There is simply an air of celebration and camaraderie among the throngs of people gathered.

Perhaps some history of this famous event is in order. The first parade began on New Year's Day in 1890 and was sponsored by the Valley Hunt Club. It is reported that about 2,000 people watched this first parade. The parade was held on the first day of the year unless that day fell on a Sunday. Then it was moved to Monday. The decision was made because some thought the commotion of the parade might scare the horses at church hitching rails along the way on a Sunday. That same schedule is still observed, although I doubt it would cause much of a problem with hitched horses today. Some traditions are hard to break.

As the parade rose to prominence, it became too large for the Hunt Club to handle, so the Tournament of Roses Association was formed. Their headquarters is in the donated mansion of the William Wrigley, Jr. family, of Wrigley's gum fame. The mansion and associated gardens were donated in 1959 to the city of Pasadena for this purpose. The Rose Bowl football game was added in 1902 to help fund the cost of the parade and has continued ever since.

The parade has been held every year except during World War II when it was cancelled in 1942, 1943 and 1945. Sadly, now it is cancelled for 2021 due to the COVID-19 virus that has affected the entire world. This devastating decision had to be made early in the year of 2020 when float building was just beginning. Not knowing what would happen with the infection, the association determined it would not be safe to have the

parade in 2021. As it turns out, this was the right decision, although it leaves a great amount of disappointment on many fronts. To name just one, the financial impact on the city of Pasadena will be monumental.

Float building begins early in the year after the overall parade theme is announced. Then each organization who wants to enter a float must come up with, and get approval for, their float's theme. It must reflect and fit with the overall theme to be approved. Most of the actual float building and designing is done by companies created for that purpose. They work most of the year building the floats on a chassis so they are ready to be decorated in December. Phoenix Decorating is the company associated with the floats I have worked on over the years. I always thought the name was significant. In mythology, Phoenix symbolizes a bird rising up from its ashes to live again for another cycle. In a sense, each float starts with an undercarriage from the previous year. It is the platform upon which building begins, and it rises from there to live again as a new float and a thing of beauty. Phoenix Decorating constructs many floats. I have never counted, but in the past, there were two large buildings housing them. Depending upon the year, perhaps they build as many as twenty-five floats.

With the brief history in mind, it is time to explain how I became involved with the famous Tournament of Roses Parade. It all started when I got married. As a new spouse, you never know what the future holds. I am pretty sure that is not news to anyone. Sometimes major things require time to develop. It was three decades into our marriage when, in August of 2001, my wife, Ellie, was hired by Iowa District West of the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod. Her job was to identify mission opportunities and involve youth and adults in service to God. This was a totally new position. She was given a computer and told to see what she could do. Her position is now known as the Iowa Director. In case you think this Iowa guy can't spell his own state correctly, the acronym actually stands for "Individual Outreach With Adults and Youth."

On New Year's Day of 2002, we were watching the Tournament of Roses Parade on TV. There we were, excitedly watching all the beautiful Rose Parade floats displayed in living color. Ellie's mother, who lived in Kansas, had attended the Rose Parade twice in the 1930s. Because of this connection, Ellie was always interested in watching the parade each New Year's Day. Years later, after her mother passed away, a treasured souvenir booklet from one of those parades was discovered. As we were watching TV that day, the question occurred to Ellie. Could there be a way through her new job to somehow involve people in this Rose Parade? It was a thought out of the blue, but an exciting one for sure. We always watched for the Lutheran Hour Float, the only Christian float in the parade, as it came down Colorado Boulevard each year. Maybe there could be a connection with that float.

As it turned out, we discovered there was an organization to do exactly that. To fulfill the dictates of her job, that next summer Ellie took a group of Iowa high school youth on a two-week mission trip to teach Vacation Bible School in some inner-city churches in Los Angeles. She did this for many summers and has experiences that could fill a book. But, for the purpose of this writing, Ellie one day mentioned her idea about the Rose Parade to Dr. Settgast, a pastor in Los Angeles. He said that was easy and told her about the Petal Pushers. The needed connection was laid out perfectly and is now part of history.

The Petal Pusher organization had been formed so volunteers could help decorate the Lutheran Hour float. It is called Petal Pushers because of all the flower petals volunteers handle in the decorating process. This gives people the opportunity to be involved up close and personal as they decorate. It is truly a unique experience and something very few people ever have the chance to do. The volunteers help cut down the cost of the float. In addition, other companies pay for Petal Pusher volunteers to decorate their floats, and that money also goes to defray the Lutheran Hour float costs. Each year, 4,000 to 5,000 volunteers come from around the country to work as Petal Pushers during the decorating days in December.

With this idea in mind, a plan was developed when Ellie returned to Iowa. She began sharing the opportunity with people in the 170 LCMS churches in the western half of Iowa. It didn't take long for a group of eager Iowans to volunteer. Who wouldn't want to leave the snowy tundra of an Iowa winter and head for sunny California? Over the pursuing months, Ellie worked diligently to make all the arrangements, and on December 28, 2002, the first group of Ioway Petal Pushers stepped off the plane into the warm California sunshine to begin their decorating adventure. None of us knew what to expect, including Ellie and me. This was all new territory but this group of about thirty individuals, many of them college students, had a grand time. It was the first successful Ioway Petal Pushers trip, and the adventures have continued under Ellie's direction for the last 17 years. Hundreds of people from Iowa have now been part of the adventure. Even relatives of Iowans from other states have joined Ellie's group. The Ioway Petal Pusher group is well known by leaders of the Petal Pusher organization in California. Our Iowa work ethic shows and they know they can count on us to show up and do a good job.

Each Pasadena trip is unique, special in so many ways. Memories are created for each person every year. They take them home and tuck them away for safe keeping. On at least three of the early trips, Ellie had tickets for our group to attend a concert, a major Christmas presentation at the Crystal Cathedral in Garden Grove, California. One year, the plane landing at LAX and, as soon as we got rental cars, we headed for the

performance and made it just in time. The performance, in this large, magnificent building covered with glass on three sides, was more than memorable. A huge stage filled one side of the church. Sets were artistically built to resemble ancient Israel where the story of Christmas first unfolded.

The sound system was stupendous, pouring out stirring music that I enjoyed more than I can say. During the performance, there were live camels and sheep parading down the aisles. Costumed actors rode in to perform on the huge sets. The most spectacular part had to be when five flying angels, from the very top of this tall building, came swooping through the space in this huge cathedral. Spotlights illuminated them as their flowing white clothing testified to how fast they were moving. Evidently suspended on invisible wires, it appeared they were indeed flying. As they flew back and forth and hovered above the buildings on the stage, their powerful voices filled the cathedral with joyous and musical delights, accompanied by a full orchestra through the incredible sound system. It took my breath away, and was a most memorable start to the Pasadena trip.

Back then, the cathedral was well known. From there, they broadcasted their "Hour of Power" worship services every Sunday. The interesting thing was that the head pastor, Reverend Schuller, a televangelist, was the uncle of a good friend or ours in Jefferson. As I indicated, things change. Because of debt, the cathedral was sold some years afterwards and those fabulous yearly presentations all came to an end. But their magnificence surely gave a hint of God's glory as he came at Christmas to be forever part of humanity. I was privileged to be there and it now lives in my memory. For those also on those trips, I trust the same is true.

Before I get back to the main topic of Petal Pushers and the Rose Parade, another set of adventures should not be overlooked from the early years of the Petal Pushers Pasadena trip. It involved the group's day of mission work across the border in Mexico. After the parade, our group usually had a tailgate party in a parking lot, waiting for a million people to clear out of the area. There was little chance of driving our caravan of vehicles from the area right after the parade when every street was clogged and nobody could move. We scheduled a tailgate picnic where we had parked. It made good sense because we were hungry by then. When that was over, the streets were cleared and we could just drive away.

From there, we would take the long drive south to the border of Mexico where we stayed in a hotel that night. The next morning, we would walk through the clanging turn style gates and into a very different land and culture. We were led by Melissa, who was working with Lutheran Hour Ministries in Mexico. She lived in California but worked each day helping Lutheran churches in Mexico. A couple of adventures I experienced in Mexico stand out in my mind. We worked with a small church one day and had sent money ahead so they

could buy food and prepare a noon meal for us. The ladies of that small congregation came before sunrise that morning and started to cook outside of the church. They were cooking a meal in a huge metal pot hanging over a fire of burning pieces of scrap wood. We were definitely not in the USA anymore. The sad part was hearing one of the ladies plead with us as we were leaving, to please not forget about them. Conditions in Mexico deteriorated and we were not able to return.

The last year we went into Mexico, Ellie sent money ahead to have a bus pick us up after we walked across the border. We loaded onto the bus, but before we could get on our way to the church we were scheduled to work with, the bus was surrounded by taxicabs so we could not move. Soon, police with machine guns arrived and discussions began. We found out later that the taxi drivers thought they should have our business and were determined we should use their services instead of the bus.

At one point, a man came into the bus and demanded that Melissa give him a huge bribe to let us move. Melissa, in her firm Spanish voice, said she would not pay a bribe, and he finally left the bus. Soon TV crews arrived and began to film the standoff. One cameraman came onto the bus to film us. We were in the middle of an adventure for sure, something we could not imagine was happening. Eventually, the taxicabs moved away, the police left and we were finally on our way. That evening, when we were back across the border at our hotel, we found ourselves on the Mexican evening news. We, of course, did not understand the Spanish broadcast, but the motel owner explained to Ellie that the news anchors were upset. They were angry that a group coming to help the people was so rudely treated.

There were great memories and some grand adventures on those early trips. However, decorating floats was the job we came to do so I should continue with that topic. On the second day in California, we were on the job doing just that. Floats are made in different sizes. The larger the float, the more costly. The Lutheran Hour float is not as large as some, but requirements are the same for all. Every square inch of every float must be covered with something organic, something that was, or still is, living. Even places that can't be seen unless you make a deliberate effort, are covered. Just to mention one example, the Farmers Insurance float is usually very large, long and tall. One year it was so tall that a major part had to be hinged so it could be laid down to get out of the building. The same thing was necessary as it went under the interstate at the end of the parade route. Our group works on their float most every year. This particular year, there was a huge dragon on the front of the float with his mouth open. Some of our group were on tall step ladders and reaching into its mouth gluing powdered rice onto the backs of its teeth making it look like tartar stains. During the actual parade, no one would be able to see that, not even those watching along the route. But the judges will look

for those places as they judge the decorating in progress and during their final judging before the parade. The judges from the Tournament of Roses Association determine the awards and there are many. It is prestigious to have that award banner in front of your float as it proudly moves down Colorado Boulevard on New Year's Day.

There are so many organic materials used to cover the float surfaces. Each kind is carefully placed to produce the colors and textures the designers had on their final sketches. Some of the materials I have seen or personally added include rice, coffee, cranberries, beans of every kind and shape, peas, orange slices, potatoes, grasses of all kinds, leaves, onion seeds, fern fronds, asparagus fern, every kind of seed imaginable, tree bark and corn silk, to name a few. If it has been, or still is alive, it is fair game. Most of these dry materials are the first items to be glued on the floats as decorating begins each December. One year, I spent hours gluing three rows of red kidney beans, a bean at a time, around a church doorway on the Lutheran Hour Float. During one of our first trips, there was a life-sized donkey standing on the front of this float. Each time I walked past the float I detected the distinct aroma of coffee. Closer inspection revealed the donkey, affectionately named Jack, had been painstakingly covered with coffee grounds earlier in the month. I am sure Juan, the coffee guy, would have been happy to know that.

Of course, the most noticeable covering on the floats is the flowers that come from all over the world. Many flowers can be attached and will last for days without wilting or losing their color. Flowers such as daisies, chrysanthemums, carnations, statice, and button mums, to name a few, are used by the tens of thousands. They are glued onto surfaces to create a brilliant color show. There are tables of volunteers near each float removing the stems and dabbing drops of glue onto the flower heads. Other volunteers convey the boxes of glue covered flowers to those on the float who are attaching them. Many times, individual petals are removed and individually glued, one petal at a time, to cover a surface. This tedious process is simply called petaling. Since petals shrink in time, the petals must be carefully overlapped so everything still remains covered on the day of the parade. Words on a float are many times covered in this unique way.

A few years ago, I decided I would no longer work on scaffolding. At my advancing age, I didn't feel comfortable being up high on a narrow plank. That year when our team reported for work, Dick, the person in charge of Petal Pushers, asked for anyone with long arms to follow him. I and some others responded, eager to get to work. Before long I climbed to where my assignment was and I found myself on scaffolding about twenty feet from the ground. The float had a Spanish theme and there was a large urn at the top. My job was to reach around and cover the back side with button mums. So much for my decision to stay on the ground. I

did my job but came down with very shaky legs and even more resolve to let the younger volunteers do the climbing. I have observed the high school and college-age people in our group love to work on scaffolding and I am glad of it.

The most noticeable flowers are the roses of course. They are normally inserted into the float on the last day. Everyone is excited to be part of this final decorating event. Roses have been inserted into vials of water so they remain fresh and look their best. Our collective groups have spent many days over the years preparing and vialing literally thousands of roses. As they are vialled, the roses are counted and inserted in rows into large slabs of thick Styrofoam until they are needed. This way they can be easily transferred to the floats. Roses of all colors are used to create the look and color splash the designers want. I have been asked many times over the years to get a slab full of vialled roses. Not just any rose will do. It must be the right color and shade to match what the designer had in mind. For example, there are batches of light pink and batches of dark pink and you might even be asked to sort within those color shades before placing them on the float. And of course, there are white, red, amber and yellow roses with shades that vary with each truck load that arrives.

Since it is the Rose Parade, roses are perhaps the dominate flower noticed during the parade. However, there are many others from around the world, some quite unique like anthuriums. Many floats have flower sprays, special bouquet arrangements containing a variety of flowers, that florists are hired to create in the final decoration event. They add a pop and wow factor. One year I worked with king protea, giant pinkish flowers that grow in only a couple places in the world and only at a certain elevation. When fully open, they can be eight inches across. I am very familiar with them for we see them on Maui where they grow at about 5,000 feet of elevation. There are smaller varieties of protea as well, in shades of orange and gold. One shipment of blue orchids knocked my socks off. They were so exquisite, so large and beautiful with a whopping cost of \$15 each. There were boxes and boxes of them, all for one float.

There is a special feeling, a bonding, a camaraderie and a spiritual connection that develops within the Iowa Petal Pusher group on each and every trip. It isn't something I can describe, but I believe every person begins to feel it during our time together, working as a team for a common purpose. I have seen it start to develop even during the training session Ellie requires on the first Saturday of December each year. It quickly builds as our team of 28 or more people moves through airports, all wearing matching Petal Pusher sweatshirts. We are noticed to say the least. Since we are all Christians, the Holy Spirit connects and knits us together into a team. Usually by day two, there are already lifelong friendships formed.

There are many fun things that happen on an Iowa Petal Pusher trip. You just never know what they will be. As an example, on our 2020 trip, there was a family, parents with three high school youth. One day found us in a parking lot with a solid wooden fence along the side and a row of orange trees on the other side. Our shuttle driver said any fruit hanging over another's property is considered fair game in California. It didn't take long for the teens to climb on each other's shoulders so they could pick oranges hanging over the parking lot fence. It was so fun to watch the excitement as young Iowans were having the time of their lives, doing something they never had done before. It didn't take long for some adults to join in. I thank those teenagers for their exuberance as they created that fun moment, something I won't soon forget.

There are not only fun things, but on occasion, funny things that happen. One hilarious moment from a trip a few years ago is forever lodged in my memory. It occurred while our group was vialing roses. The first person was to pick up a long-stemmed red rose, quickly strip off the sharp thorns with a simple handheld tool and hand it to the next person. They would cut the stem to the right length and hand the flower downline for insertion into a vial of water. The last person would push the vial rose into a Styrofoam pad and keep the count. You would be surprised how many roses can be vialled with everyone doing their little part of the process. I will protect the innocent and call the first guy Tom and the next lady Jane. It was Jane's 50th birthday that very day. After this team had been moving, grooving and having fun, they got a short break while waiting for more roses to arrive. Jane picked up her phone and called her husband back in Iowa to connect with him on her special birthday. She excitedly told him what a marvelous birthday she was having. He must have asked what was making it so special. She proceeded to tell him she had already received over a thousand red roses and she even had her own stripper! You can't make that stuff up. Laughter was the order of the day when that was shared at the group meeting at the hotel that evening.

In order to get into the decorating building, volunteers must wear a Petal Pusher sweatshirt. There are hundreds of people in the building every day, all wearing identical sweatshirts while they work. Having led mission trips for many years, Ellie is always concerned about the image we project. She asks everyone to realize that as we reach and stretch while decorating, sweatshirts can easily pull up and pants can slide down, unknowingly exposing some ugly backside cleavage. If this happens to a team member, Ellie says to simply and quietly pull their shirt down to cover the display and walk away. The team member will understand and be grateful. We talk about this at the training meeting in December so everyone is familiar with the procedure. On one Petal Pusher trip, a guy noticed his wife displaying some backside cleavage as she was reaching to put flowers onto the float. He hurried over and grabbed her pants with one hand and her shirt with the other and

pulled them together. She turned around in shock and said, "What are you doing?" That's when he realized she was not one of our group and she was not his wife! All is well that ends well. This unexpected event ended in a good laugh.

Decorating begins in early December when the dry items are attached to the floats. The real fun comes at the very end when the live flowers are added. This is where the loway team goes into action each year. We always fly from Des Moines or Kansas City, wherever the least expensive tickets can be obtained. We fly to California on December 28th and decorate on the 29, 30, and 31st on a normal year, if there is such a thing. A few times it was crunch time and some of our group members, those with the super abundant Iowa work ethic, returned after their shift was over to assist on a second shift on the night of the 31st. They worked into the early morning hours of the new year to help finish some floats. There are many things affecting what must be accomplished each day. For example, if the weather is exceptionally warm, some flowers cannot be added until the last minute. That creates a crunch time at the end.

A few years ago, Phoenix Decorating decided it was more economical to move from their two rented buildings in Pasadena to a huge building ten miles east in Irwinsdale. This changed things because the floats now must travel to get to the parade route. Floats must be completed by the last shift on the 30th or for sure, by early on the 31st. This gives our group mainly two decorating days and a free day to do other things, like preparing for our day of service at the Union Rescue Mission on Skid Row in downtown Los Angeles. This day of mission service is usually scheduled for January 2, the day after the Rose Parade.

For many years, each member of our team has lugged two large suitcases to California. One was for their personal items and the other for donated items given by people and churches in Iowa who want to be a part of the adventure. This provides items for homeless people on Skid Row. Money is also donated and on this free day, we literally invade a Dollar Store or a 99¢ Store. We divide into groups to purchase additional items for our Skid Row mission adventure. It is interesting to see our whole team dressed in Petal Pusher sweatshirts pour into the store. By forming groups of 2 or 3, we quickly purchase what is needed. Some may get 100 toothbrushes, some 200 toothpastes, or carts full of shampoo, soap, socks, etc. The list goes on. It is a riot to watch our group as I try to photograph the event. As each group goes through a checkout line, they individually scan each item. It isn't long before those running the cash registers get involved in the fun. As we leave the store, there are register tapes that may be six feet long. The whole adventure is a fun party in progress. You really have to be there to understand. Ellie always calls the store ahead of time so they know we are coming and won't feel overwhelmed.

There are so many details I should cover as I write about the Pasadena adventures over the years. I am finding it hard to condense so many trips into one writing. Keeping things in sequence is difficult since things happen in unique ways and change from year to year. After the decorating is finished and the parade is over, there was always a major mission project each year. For many, this was also one of the highlights of the trip. I could write pages about the Skid Row adventures over the years, but I decided to focus more on the decorating and parade instead. But, since these mission adventures are a major part of each trip, I would be amiss to not mention them. There were two major mission adventures over the years. During the first years, we took the long drive to Mexico where we walked across the border to work in Lutheran churches for a day. On later trips, we began working with the homeless on Skid Row in inner city Los Angeles instead. I hope that helps to understand my references to these mission events that are scattered here and there within the article.

A little history is in order here. For the early Iowa District West Petal Pusher trips, we viewed the parade at the very end of the route where Colorado Boulevard intersects Sierra Madre. There the parade turns north for a short distance and goes under Interstate 210 into a parking area. For a fee, people can inspect the floats up close and personal for the next day or two. There was no charge to watch the parade along the street at this intersection, but the police would not let people gather there until almost parade time. Then crowds would rush in and it was hard to see the parade unless you managed to stay upfront. Some locals would even carry stepladders to get above other's heads. We did this for a few years, but it wasn't pleasant standing on the street for hours on end. One year someone suggested we should bring folding chairs. That year we purchased one at Walmart for everyone in our group and used them to watch the parade. Then we took them to Mexico on the mission outreach we were doing at that time and left the chairs there. During the early years, it was safe to go to Mexico, but later, gang violence in Mexico, caused us to change our mission service to Skid Row.

If you live with Ellie, there are always "God stories" unfolding. Because God intervened, we no longer have to jockey for position to view the parade. The story begins at Walmart on December 31, on one of our medical supply buying adventures in preparation to take these items into Mexico the day after the Rose Parade. While we were shopping, Ellie noticed a guy who kept appearing in every aisle she was in. She became a little spooked, especially when he finally came up to her and asked if our group was Lutheran. We were all in our distinctive Petal Pusher sweatshirts as we pushed carts full of band aids, bandages, etc. down the aisles. Each group had a certain amount of money to spend on these items, donated by lowans back home. The guy asked Ellie if our group had seats for the parade the next day. Long story short, he offered our group thirty chairs in front of the large Presbyterian church midway down the Colorado Boulevard parade route.

A decision had to be made. Was this a joke or was it a sincere offer? Maybe it was somebody's fun prank and when we arrived for our seats, there would be laughter and poking fun at this group of gullible Iowans. Okay God, what should she do? She decided to accept the offer and said thanks. We would see what the next day would bring. We put the folding chairs back and left Walmart with only the medical supplies. Ellie told the group what had happened so everyone was in the loop and somewhat prepared. We were up early on parade morning to drive about twenty miles to get to those seats promised to us by this mysterious man. We arrived in the darkness that early morning and found the church. There they were, thirty folding chairs with the word Iowa taped onto each one! God is good even though it takes faith to understand that at times.

The man who offered the seats was there. His name was Chris and we learned New Year's Day was his special time. He came carrying a white cane and dressed to the hilt, wearing a black top hat, tuxedo and tails and a fancy white ruffled shirt. We learned he and his family did this every year. This was obviously a special day for Chris, no doubt about it. He even brought oranges from his tree and donut treats to share with us. There we were, this group of wide-eyed Iowans, with our feet on Colorado Boulevard snacking on California oranges as the southeastern sky began to lighten on the first day of a new year. Our free seats had been held for us from the previous day and throughout the night. Mobs of people began taking their crowded places in the stands beside the church and across the street. We were in the middle of a huge party of happy people as we waited for the famous parade to begin. Ellie told me later she believes this was God's acknowledgement that she should continue to bring people to decorate the floats and do a mission project. It has continued to this day even though the virus brought it to a halt this year.

Chris was a member of Messiah Lutheran Church, which is a little north of the Presbyterian Church on Colorado Boulevard. He worked out an arrangement that he would put up chairs and hold the seats and he could have half of them while Presbyterian members would use the other half. This had been going on for some time before as far as I know. For some reason that year, he didn't have enough people to fill his half of the seats and that is why he invited our group at Walmart. How did God work it out that Chris and our group would be at Walmart at the same time? Some years later, Ellie and Chris were visiting while waiting for the parade to start. She told him how apprehensive she was when he offered the seats, and how he, more or less, spooked her that day. Chris shared that he was also afraid to talk to Ellie that day. He said God had distinctively told him to ask us. Ellie and Chris had a good laugh and an even greater connection. What a revelation and the rest is history.

Every year since then, those seats were there for each group of lowans who came to decorate the Lutheran Hour and other floats. But the God story is not over. On New Year's Day of 2013, Ellie was unable to lead the trip because she had fallen on our wet patio in October, hit the back of her head on a step, and broke four ribs. Pastor Meyer and his wife agreed to lead the trip since they had been on a previous one. Ellie and Pastor texted a bazillion times during the trip to answer questions and help him navigate and lead the group. On the last day of decorating, he sent an urgent text telling Ellie he still had not connected with Chris to reconfirm that the parade seats were waiting for the group. Ellie had emailed and texted Chris as well, with no response. What was happening?

Later that evening, Kathy, Chris's wife, just happened to look at Chris's computer and found the email and got in touch with Pastor Meyer and Ellie. The reason for no response was shocking. Chris had suddenly died two days before! On New Year's Day, the Petal Pushers arrived and were greeted by Kathy and the rest of the family. Pastor Meyer held a short service with the Petal Pushers and the family right there on Colorado Boulevard while waiting for the parade to begin, trying to give comfort to the family. God was there and he showed up for real a little later. During the parade, there must have been a breakdown. The floats came to a standstill with the Lutheran Hour Float right in front of the family. It had been overcast all morning, but when the float stopped, the sun shone through a break in the clouds right onto the Lutheran Hour Float illuminating it in bright light. The song playing loudly through the float's loudspeakers was "I Can Only Imagine." God had shown up with His perfect timing. You can't make this stuff up. Ellie and I missed it, but we heard about the miracle from those privileged to be there that day. If you are not familiar with the words of the song, please Google it.

The day of the famous parade comes so early for our group of Petal Pushers. We are many times exhausted from working the night shift the day before, depending upon the year. Our hotel is always miles away, so there is travel time involved. We must be on our way before the sun even considers gracing the eastern horizon. We arrive very early to relieve Jason, Chris's son, who now sets up the chairs and stands watch over them all night, just so we can enjoy the parade in comfort. Even though we are tired, excitement wells up inside us from what we have been doing and for anticipation of the parade. We may be in California, but the weather is usually chilly this time of day. We wear coats over our heavy sweatshirts, and some even cover with blankets as we settle into our seats. As morning finally dawns and the sun beams break free over the buildings across the street, clothing layers are soon shed and it feels like California once again.

You might wonder why we stay so far from Pasadena. It is because hotels near there double and triple room rates at that time of year. I never thought that was right. They never asked me if it was okay, but they do it anyway, I guess just because they can. To control costs, we stay twenty or more miles from the Pasadena area each year. We have used four hotels since Ellie began these trips. The last two trips found us staying at Springhill Suites in Anaheim, just outside Disneyland's main gate. It is very comfortable, and as a side benefit, I get to watch the Disney fireworks every night. Nobody else seems to be as excited about seeing them. I really think Ellie should schedule the evening devotions outside, so everyone can take in the colored light and sound show.

Arranging transportation is a major task when planning the trip. In the early years, we flew into LAX and rented six or seven cars or minivans. There is no way to explain that hassle so I won't even try. Eventually, we got everyone and all our luggage to a nearby Residence Inn for the week. Each day we would caravan to the work sites in Pasadena. Everyone could relax and enjoy the scenery on these drives, except for the drivers navigating very unfamiliar territory.

An interesting side note, the very first trip Ellie organized for 2003 started out a little bumpy. An airport shuttle got everyone to the car rental site near LAX. She presented the confirmation papers for the vehicles she had reserved months earlier. The guy simply said, "We have no cars for you." What? But we have confirmation numbers. "Sorry, if I have no cars, there is nothing I can do." Long story made shorter, they finally did move us and our mountain of luggage to our hotel. The next day they took our volunteer drivers to another car rental agency. And wouldn't you know it, they didn't have enough vehicles either. There is always a plan B, but at times even that doesn't work. Ellie is good at thinking on her feet. I guess we make a good team. She just acts and I sit and think and ponder. If I was in charge, perhaps we would still be waiting for vehicles.

As we were trying to comprehend the no vehicle situation, someone returned a 15-passenger van. They offered that as an option. We had no choice since we were scheduled to begin decorating shortly. I became the driver and was affectionately known as "van man" for the rest of the trip. When we reached a destination, it seemed to take forever for my passengers to disembark. They just kept pouring out of that long van. It was much later when we discovered the district had no insurance coverage on a van of that size. God was looking out for me. There were no accidents. I do have a question for God though. Why were there no vehicles when we had the confirmation numbers? Needless to say, Ellie never used that rental company again.

Back in those early years, six or more Iowa drivers every year needed to volunteer to drive eager and trusting Petal Pushers onto the clogged California freeways, as though they knew what they were doing. God kept us completely accident free all those years. I am so amazed. We did have a good system that worked most of the time. Each car had a driver, a co-pilot with maps, and a two-way radio just in case they got lost. This did happen now and then because the radios only reached about a mile. If a stoplight delayed your vehicle, you may end up on your own. We always traveled as a caravan when the group was on the move. Ellie drove the lead vehicle and, when I was on the trip, I drove the last one. Ellie would radio back that we needed to change two lanes to the left. The last vehicle would move over and block traffic so everyone ahead could follow suit. The system worked well even though I held my breath every year. There were challenges. One in particular comes to mind as a trip was ending. Our caravan was headed to the airport to turn in the vehicles. Five lanes of stop-and-go traffic kept one vehicle from moving over and they were pushed past the exit. Once at the rental center, one of our youth used his cell phone to connect and directed that lost car back to the fold. All ended well but there were tense moments at times.

Maybe five years ago, it seemed to me we had tested God's patience long enough. I suggested that Ellie check into a shuttle service. Sparing you another paragraph of explanation, we eventually hired Lonnie, who owns his own shuttle service. Since then, we travel on the freeways in style without accident exposure at every turn. It adds additional cost, but has removed much stress. This means every day must be planned to the hilt so Lonnie knows when and where we need to be at all times. It takes days to set that all in stone but, in the end, it is all worth it. Now, God and I can both relax.

With all that in mind, I do want to add a little more detail about the Tournament of Roses Parade itself. When our float decorating is finished, there is great anticipation to actually see the parade in person. It is a special thrill to watch the floats we decorated come past our viewing location. The parade begins at 8:00 a.m. when the parade units roll onto Orange Grove Boulevard and move past all the network TV cameras. Then they turn onto Colorado Boulevard for the major part of the parade. Our special seats are near the middle of the route so it takes half an hour to reach us. Without a doubt, we know exactly when the parade has begun. Most years, this is signaled when a Stealth bomber flies slow and low down the length of Colorado Boulevard. It is an absolutely awesome sight. I have seen it so many times, but I get goosebumps just putting it in writing. Every year I remark how grateful I am to live in the country that has that flying machine in its arsenal. I would hate to be on the opposing side if hostilities broke out.

As you have no doubt already gathered, this famous parade is a time like none other, a huge unfolding spectacle, a party welcoming a new year filled with hope and potential. The sense of belonging and the anticipation and excitement of just being there hangs in the air. In recent years, there are over forty brilliantly decorated floats in the parade. Some go to great lengths adding animation, which is no small feat. Large companies spend major money so their company is represented on Colorado Boulevard and seen on TV throughout the world. Honda has sponsored the parade since 2011. They always have a large float and get to be at the head of the parade. Nearly every service group in the country has a major float as well. Many of them use their own volunteers to decorate, but Petal Pushers have also helped some on occasion.

I am amazed at the high school and college bands that come from all over the country to participate. More than twenty huge bands are featured every year, many from other countries. The 2020 parade featured international bands from Mexico, Japan, Denmark, Costa Rica, Puerto Rico and El Salvador. Most of these groups are huge with hundreds of students and chaperones making the trip. The logistics of getting them all to Pasadena, housing and feeding them, and keeping everyone on the straight and narrow, is beyond what I can imagine. But what an experience of a lifetime for them. Fundraising has to be monumental. I know the money it takes to support 28 Petal Pushers for a week and that pales in comparison. Each participant pays their part of the total cost.

Since the parade originally began with the Hunt Club, there are over forty equestrian units in the parade featuring hundreds of horses. They are decked out in expensive trappings as they prance and trot down the street, apparently very proud to be there. The Goodyear Blimp is always circling over the route, and sometimes there are small planes skywriting sentences in the California sky. I am so amazed that the words they leave behind stay together for as long as they do. Our group of Petal Pushers are usually mild mannered, but we stand up and yell, scream and wave as the floats we have worked on come past. We get smiles and waves back from those riding on the float. Riding a float on this special day is an honor for sure. Ellie was chosen to ride on the Lutheran Hour Float in 2009, because of all the workers she brought to decorate for so many years. It is an experience she will never forget and an honor she is proud to have received.

There are so many more things that could be shared. Indeed, a small booklet for each trip could be written, each filled with adventures unique to that time. As we look ahead, how many more Tournament of Roses Parades Ellie and I will attend hangs in the balance at our advancing ages. Perhaps we have already enjoyed the last one. It is amazing how many of these years have come and gone. Amazing still are all the photos I have taken. I elected myself to be the group photographer each year. Today, everyone has a phone and can take

their own shots, but I do it because it is a hobby of mine. Most every year, after I return to Iowa, I spend inordinate amounts of time improving the lighting and cropping on all my photos. Then I transfer them to thumb drives and send one to each person who was on the team that year. I usually have 500 to 600 photos they can choose from to share with friends or family. Ellie and I also spend the next week constructing a large photo book for each person on the trip. We try to capture every part of the adventure in the photos. We hope the books will be treasured items from their Pasadena adventures.

At some point, I need to give my readers a break and bring this to a close. Thank you for reading to the end. If you have not been part of this adventure, I hope you will add becoming a Petal Pusher and attending the parade to your bucket list. Search for the Petal Pusher organization on the web and sign up. If you have questions, call Ellie. She has answers and always has her phone at her side.

Petal Pusher extraordinaire,
Lynn Menz