NIU Sociology Report Aids in Local Historic Landmark Status of Old Finn Hall

A research report compiled and presented by sociology professor and her student research team to the Landmark Commission of DeKalb and the DeKalb City Council has resulted in a resolution passed to grant historic landmark status to the former Finnish Majakka Hall located at 1021 State Street. The current occupant of the building is the non-profit organization, the DeKalb Area Women’s Center.

Associate Professor Diane Rodgers and her research team, composed of graduate students Jessica Petersen, Jill Sanderson and Lucy Sosa, with assistance from undergraduate students, Ellen Murphy and Katie Piotrowska, have been working on a project about the influence of Finnish-American culture in DeKalb from the late 1800’s to the 1960s.

In the process of their research they were asked by Anna Marie Coveny, the director of DeKalb Area Women’s Center, to assist the non-profit organization in their pursuit of landmark status. Landmark status requires that a building meet strict criteria that would deem it significant.

Typically buildings granted landmark status are designed by a well-known architect, possess a particular architectural style or are connected to a famous figure in the community.

Majakka Hall, although architecturally appealing, falls into the category of “vernacular architecture” and was built to serve as a Finnish Temperance Hall. The report detailed the cultural significance of this Hall and the contribution of the Finnish population of DeKalb at the local and national levels. The neighborhood surrounding the Hall was known as “Finn Town,” at one time a largely self-sustaining ethnic enclave, with two Finnish halls, a church, cooperatives and privately owned stores.

Using archival data, interviews, secondary sources and neighborhood/building guided tours, Rodgers and her student research team used sociological insights about the Finns in DeKalb to show how the Finnish Hall met the criteria for landmark status.

“We were fortunate to be able to build on two other NIU researchers’ previous work: Joan Metzger, archivist at the Regional History Center, who had written a paper on the Finns of DeKalb, and Professor Jeffery Chown’s documentary ‘DeKalb Stories’” said Rodgers.

“Finnish community members have generously given their time and were instrumental in providing necessary detail for the report,” she added.

The designation of landmark status for the former Finn Hall is the outcome of a successful collaboration between NIU and the larger community.

To learn more about this collaboration, come to the DeKalb Area Women’s Center at 1021 State St. (Old Finn Hall) on Friday, April 5th, 7-8pm to hear Prof. Diane Rodgers, and her student research team, including Jessica Petersen, Jill Sanderson and Lucy Sosa discuss their work on DeKalb’s Finnish American history and the preservation of Majakka Hall.