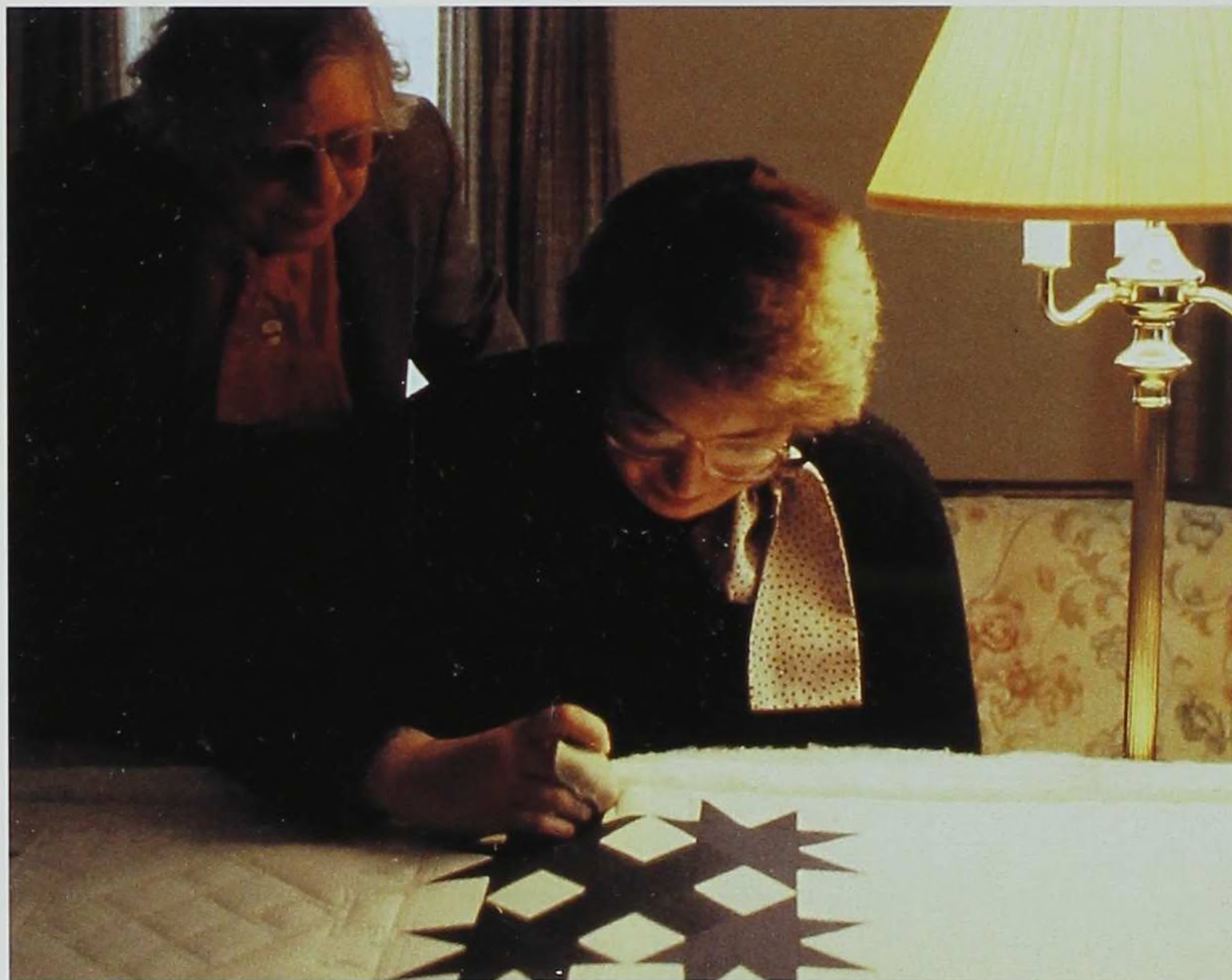


Traditions



Lorraine Keel watches as Karen Yant perfects her quilting skills.

Master & Apprentice

Passing on Cultural Knowledge and Traditions

by Karen Heege

Imagine the scene—

A young Norwegian-American woman, frustrated with classical music, discovers the traditional music that drives the dancers at an old time Scandinavian community dance in northeast Iowa. Fascinated by both the music and the sense of community that surround the dances, she seeks out the master fiddlers, working with several over the years to learn the tunes. After many lessons, formal and informal, one master fiddler asks the woman to accompany his band during a performance at the community dance. The young woman knows she has learned her lessons well when the master artist, Bill Sherburne, gives her his electronic pickup to amplify her violin, and asks her to continue playing for the community dances. Now,

years later, the woman, Beth Hoven Rotto, is part of a band that plays traditional Scandinavian music for festivals, heritage celebrations, concerts, and, most importantly, community dances, just as her teacher did.

Or how about this: A man with limited knowledge but unlimited curiosity seeks out a master wood turner. The master is reluctant, but the student is persistent. Finally a project is agreed upon and the two men begin to work together weekly. Lessons include tools and how to use them, wood turning design, turning and spindle techniques, and “scraping versus shaving” (or how to turn with a shaving technique). The best lesson the student learns is when he puts a gouge through the bottom of his first turned bowl. The master says, “Oh, well, that happens

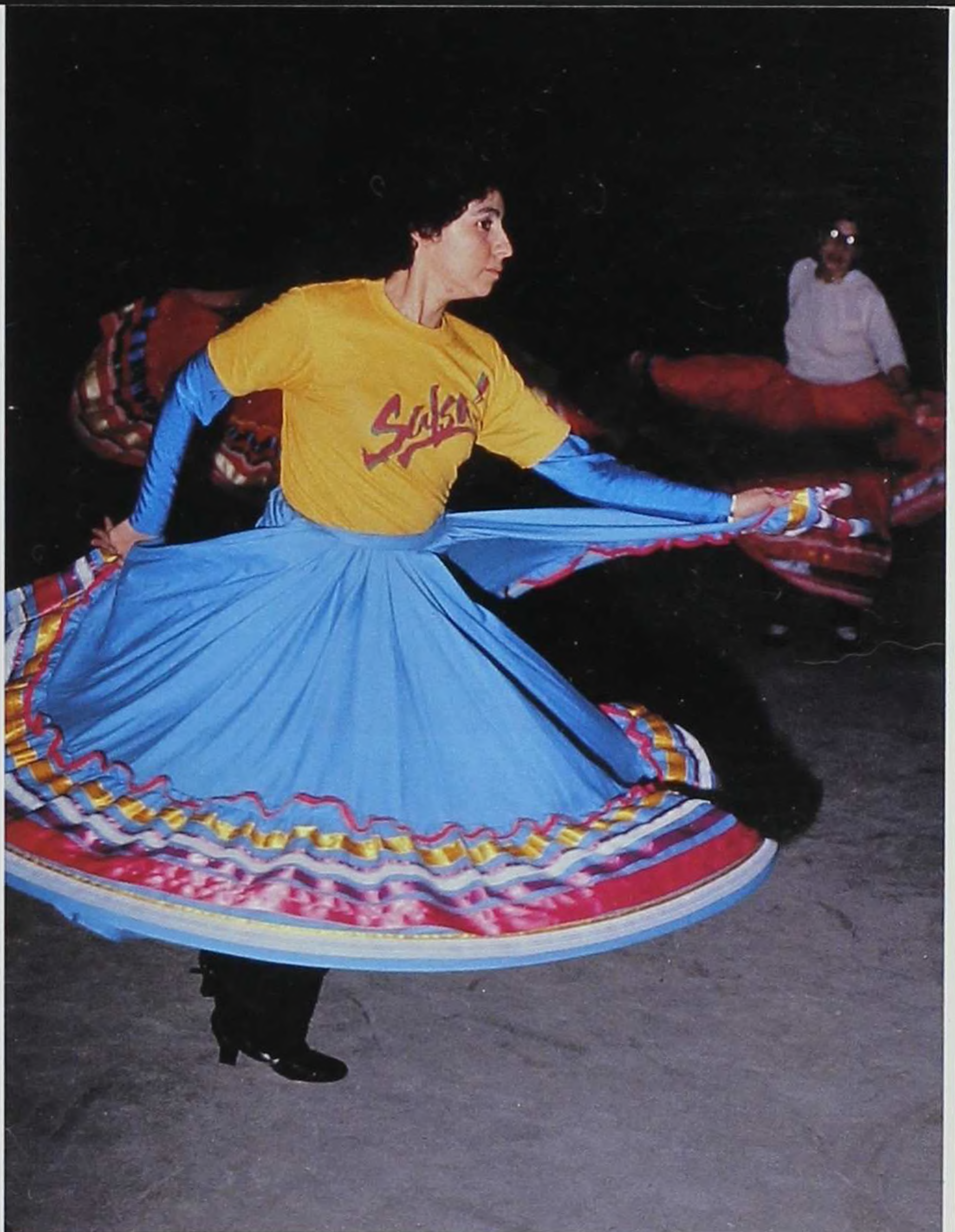
sometimes." Today, the student, Daniel Bray, still does some turning, and he considers the master wood turner, Rick Reeves, to be a great teacher, a good friend, and his sharpest critic.

Both of these scenarios illustrate the magic that takes place when a master artist passes on traditional knowledge and art to a motivated student. The Traditional Arts Apprentices Program, sponsored by the Iowa Arts Council, Department of Cultural Affairs, offers traditional master artists and apprentices the opportunity to work together, sharing not only a love of teaching and learning but also the stories and values important to the community where the traditions are cherished.

Folklorist Steven Ohrn created the Iowa Folk Arts Apprenticeship Program in 1984, offering traditional master artists and apprentices the opportunity to pass on such traditions as Czech egg decorating, Amana rug weaving and basket making, decoy carving, and numerous musical and dance traditions. Everyone involved in the apprenticeship program—master artists, apprentices, and their communities—gained a renewed understanding of the importance of passing on traditions.

For example, Joanna Schanz, who learned to weave German willow baskets from Philip Dickel, the last traditional basketmaker in the Amana Colonies, became a master artist in the Apprenticeship Program. Joanna believes students need to learn the entire process to fully understand the subtleties of basket form and construction. Her apprentice, David Schmidt, was a student committed to understanding every aspect of willow basketry. Under Schanz's direction, Schmidt harvested, prepared, and wove the willow into baskets. To complete the knowledge cycle, he also planted willow slips to replace those harvested for baskets. For him, the apprenticeship provided the opportunity to gain in-depth knowledge about German willow basket making. For Joanna Schanz, the apprenticeship helped to enforce the idea that willow baskets were, and continue to be, an important part of the community, that basketry should not be taken for granted, and, with new people learning to make baskets, that the tradition would not die.

Take another instance: Tesa Heldenbrand had taken violin lessons as a child. Years after starting her family, she longed to do something for herself and wanted to participate in the jam sessions and fiddle contests held in her community around Winterset. She sought out Eddie Bengé, an old time fiddler, to serve as her teacher. For Heldenbrand, the crowning moment in her apprenticeship came when she won the



Paula Plasencia Richardson practices one of the Mexican folklorico dances she learned during her apprenticeship.

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Tesa Heldenbrand, on right, takes the lead on fiddle as master artist Eddie Bengé, second from right, watches and listens.



Master artist Joanna Schanz assists apprentice David Schmidt weave an Amana willow basket (left) and plant willow slips (above), to replenish the supply of raw materials for baskets.

junior division of the old time fiddle contest at the Iowa State Fair, and Eddie Bengé won the senior division contest. To determine the grand champion, Heldenbrand would have to compete against her teacher. After a sleepless night, she played her best, but Bengé proved to be the better fiddler and won the contest. Today Heldenbrand plays mostly with friends and at church, but fondly remembers the lessons learned from master fiddler Eddie Bengé.

These stories of lessons learned by both master artist and apprentice illustrate the importance of passing traditional knowledge on to a new generation. In many cases, a single person carries the whole of a community's traditions and is waiting for the right

time and the right person. Often master artists are hesitant, unsure that the knowledge they possess is worthy of passing on to others. In most cases, once the apprenticeship is well under way, a strong bond forms between the master artist and the apprentice, allowing for the magical flow of traditional knowledge from one person and one generation to another. ❖

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Apprentice Michael Haverkamp practices clawhammer banjo phrasing while master artist David Marsh looks on.

