

Clinton rallies the Range

■ 'Jobs, baby jobs!'

HIBBING — Sen. Hillary Clinton told a roaring crowd of nearly 5,000 people last night that “hard-working folks” of the Iron Range want a government that works as hard as they have their entire lives.

“You’ve sacrificed for America, and you deserve better than you’ve been delivered the last eight years,” she said.

Speaking to a packed Hibbing Memorial Arena, Clinton - who battled Barack Obama for the Democratic nomination throughout this year’s primaries - called Obama “the only one who will stand up for you, the only one who will fight for the middle class, the only one who will change the direction of this country.”

Echoing a familiar Obama campaign theme, Clinton said: “This is our moment, this is our time. The day of reckoning is upon us.”

The New York senator and former first lady asked listeners to compare the past eight years of Republican leadership with the previous eight years under her husband, former President Bill Clinton. The Clinton years, she said, were marked by low poverty and a budgetary surplus.

“It took a Democratic president to clean up after the first Bush, and it’s going to take a Democratic president to clean up after the second,” she said, to thunderous cheers and applause.

She said the nation owes a great debt to the “hard working, nation-serving, patriotic people of the Iron Range” who “have provided the iron ore to produce the steel that has armed and protected America over the years.”

The region’s people had been at the “real core of making America safe and making America work,” she said.

Clinton said Range residents have given much more than iron ore, steel and votes during the course of American history, and have served a vital role in tipping close elections of the past with votes.

With help from the region’s voters, “America will once again rise from the ashes of the Bushes, if you give us a chance to lead,” she said.

She said if there is any doubt in people’s minds regarding who they should vote for, one should analyze what has been happening during the past month in America.

“Retirees’ nest eggs are cracking,



Photo by Jeff Warner

Sen. Hillary Clinton campaigned for Democratic presidential candidate Sen. Barack Obama in Omaha, Neb., Minneapolis and Hibbing, Minn. on Tuesday. Clinton demonstrated that she is still one of the prime draws among Democrats, while delivering a message of change to a packed Hibbing Memorial Arena.

small businesses can’t find credit, people here in Minnesota are losing their jobs, students can’t find affordable loans and people who get their 401(k)s are afraid to open the envelopes,” she said.

“Our economy is not working,” she added. “It’s not producing the jobs and the economic prosperity that hardworking Americans should be entitled to see.”

While “hardworking families were invisible” to people like (George W.) Bush and John McCain, the Republican presidential nominee, when the financial crisis hit the Wall Street banking sector, they were quick to want to “bail them out,” she said.

If policies like those of the past eight years continue, America will be “unrecognizable” because people will begin to lose hope in the American dream, Clinton said.

She said the election is coming down to the simple slogan of “jobs, baby, jobs.” It’s time, she said, to “put the focus on the vast majority of Americans who do the work, who get up every morning, who take

care of their families, who support their communities.”

She said America is resilient, and will “navigate through troubled waters.” Obama and Joseph Biden, the Democratic vice-presidential nominee, “will come into the White House with the resolve, determination and intelligence to really start turning our country around,” she said.

“Yes, the times might be tough, but we are tougher than the times,” she added. “We’re Americans. We don’t avoid tough challenges, we meet them. We don’t ignore problems, we solve them.”

“We’re a nation of builders and doers, and we need to be again,” she said. “There is no challenge we can’t meet when we have leaders that summon the best of our nation.”

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Mining layoffs affect workers, families

■ 'When mining goes down, it hurts'

CHISHOLM — Jason Hemphill received notice last January of his potential layoff. A heavy equipment operator at Hibbing Taconite, he didn't spend a lot of time being concerned, until arriving at work Tuesday and the announcement was "in ink."

"I kind of knew it was coming, but it's still a shock. It's tough, lots of worrying," he said while sitting in his recently purchased home.

"The more a guy thinks about it, the more he starts to worry. I guess you just lay back and pray for the best."

Hemphill, a former automotive mechanic, has been working at HibTac for more than two years. He's grateful that he'll likely receive a portion of his former wage, unemployment and continued medical insurance benefits.

His colleagues with lesser time invested remain Hemphill's greatest concern because they're unlikely to receive benefits beyond unemployment.

He saw a lot of "worried faces" Tuesday.

"If you have two years in, you can definitely survive the summer," said Hemphill, adding that he doesn't know if he'll be called back. "You have to cut costs a little bit, but nothing too bad."

"Now you just start thinking of ways to save money, cut corners," he said. "After six months, I will be more concerned. If there's word we're not getting back to work, then it'll be stress time."

Cliffs Natural Resources announced Tuesday it will idle the second of its three pellet production furnaces at HibTac this March, followed by a complete facility shutdown in May.

The shutdown is expected to last for about 15 weeks, with one furnace expected to be back online in September.

Frank Jenko, president of United Steelworkers Local 2705, said a total of 90 workers will be laid off indefinitely by the end of April. The remaining 350 hourly employees will be laid off by mid-May.

The news comes after HibTac idled the first of its production lines in January. At that time, 550 union employees were working there. Many took buyouts and 33 employees took voluntary layoffs.

"The handwriting, I guess, was on the wall," said Jenko of the full shutdown. He said the news was unwelcome but not unexpected for HibTac's remaining 440 union employees.

"We had hoped to hang on with the amount of people we have now, but the economy is just too bad," he said.

Temporary layoffs have occurred at HibTac, but no indefinite layoffs have occurred since the mid-1980s, during the country's last major recession, said Jenko.

"Anybody who gets laid off, it's a tough time, especially when it's an indefinite situation," he added. "It's difficult for everybody, especially with the economy this bad."

Hemphill remains optimistic of his ability to fall back on his formal education if he isn't called back this September. But the layoff is still a life disruption that requires adjustment.

He's making twice the wage he was as a mechanic. And "times looked excellent" two years ago when he took the job at HibTac. He felt secure, and didn't anticipate the possibility of having to move from the area.

"All of us younger guys were loving it," he said. "Money was coming in. We were buying houses ... a new truck, and now it's like you have to sit and worry."

Hemphill's wages have enabled him to easily spend money on goods and services, especially at local establishments.

"Now, it's just kind of like it's being taken away," he said.

The shutdown doesn't only impact mine employees, but local businesses as well.

Hemphill has talked with friends who own local businesses. He said "things have been going downhill," due to area mine layoffs. And people he's talked to are concerned.

The wife of his coworker, for example, is a hair designer whose business is largely dependent on mining employees. Now, her business and tips are dwindling, said Hemphill.

"It kind of just trickles down," he added.

Local businesses catering to mines have been feeling a business slowdown since last fall, said Jon Ander-

son, the regional manager of P&H Minepro Services, which manufactures mining shovels, drills and drag lines.

"Orders for new equipment have dried up with the credit crunch and a downturn in commodities," he said. "It's the same story everywhere."

Like any large company, P&H is cutting costs where it makes sense. However, it's difficult when cutting costs is affecting people's livelihood, said Anderson, adding that the company hasn't reduced its local workforce.

Even though the shutdown affects his business, Anderson said he's thinking about HibTac employees and their families, calling the planned shutdown "unfortunate."

"It's a business cycle," he said. "We've been through this before, some of us three or four times."

"When mining goes down, it hurts," he added.

B. Miller Products in Hibbing, which sells janitorial supplies to the mines, has also experienced decreased sales.

Owner Terry Miller said the company is carefully managing inventory because orders are down. However, employees have been retained with reductions in hours.

Miller said the news of HibTac's pending shutdown is difficult.

"It's news we didn't want to hear, and we're disappointed the economy is such that they had to announce a shutdown," he said. "We know it affects everyone on the Range."

Like most, he hopes it's short-term.

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Union workers protest Wal-Mart

■ Al Franken visits to show support

HIBBING — Local trade union members gathered at highways 169 and 73 in Hibbing Thursday to protest Hibbing Wal-Mart's failure to rely on local union labor for a remodeling project.

Union members accused the company of "shopping out bids" and said out-of state and non-union labor will soon revamp Hibbing's Wal-Mart in a \$1.8 million project. They said the store was originally built with local union labor.

Dan Hendrickson, an International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) union official, said a few local union contractors will assist with the project — including Mesabi Glass, Range Cornice and Roofing and "tin bangers" performing duct work — but it's a "minute percentage of the \$1.8 million."

Hedrickson said about a dozen electrical workers would have worked 12-hour shifts for about two months, had the union been granted the contract.

"Everything got yanked from us," he said. "It's almost like they took everybody's bids from here, and then went and shopped them out completely."

Al Franken, the DFL nominee for the U.S. Senate seat now held by Republican Norm Coleman, was on the Range for Fourth of July-related activities.

He visited the protest site Thursday and said "the least (Wal-Mart) could do" is use union labor on construction projects.

"We have to get back in this country to where we care about quality, and we care about paying people enough, so these people can buy things and have a good quality of life," Franken said, in an interview.

Gordon Smith, an organizer with the International Union of Painters and Allied Trades, said local trade unions learned of the project — slated to begin July 21 — a few weeks ago.

He said they approached Wal-Mart's local and corporate offices to submit bids, but learned later the project had been awarded to a general contractor in South Dakota, who then picked out-of-state subcontractors.

"It's very frustrating," said Smith. "You can't allow these companies and businesses to keep undermining the standards of everybody. If you do, pretty soon they'll have everybody working for nothing."

Smith said union workers will protest at Wal-Mart until construction starts or Wal-Mart changes its decision to farm out the work.

"I'm not overly optimistic this is going to happen because a lot of these people we talked to from corporate Wal-Mart basically have the



Photo by Jeff Warner

Al Franken, the DFL candidate for U.S. Senate in this year's race, visited a protest near Hibbing Wal-Mart to show his support of union labor.

attitude like 'We can do what we want. Who cares,'" he said.

Smith said there is 15 to 20 percent unemployment among the thousands of trades union workers on the Iron Range, yet "they (Wal-Mart) feel they have to import all of these people from all over the country to do this."

Management at Hibbing's Wal-Mart declined to comment on the union claims.

Daphne Moore of Wal-Mart's corporate offices in Bentonville, Ark., said the company always seeks "to get the best contracting team that we can" for its projects.

"Sometimes this includes union labor; sometimes it doesn't," Moore said. "The choice depends on who we feel is best qualified to get the job done."

She said Wal-Mart construction projects do ultimately have an impact on the local economy. And expansion or the remodeling of Wal-Mart "will certainly generate tax revenue as well," she said.

Hibbing's Wal-Mart is located in a tax-free zone.

Franken said he had performed research on Wal-Mart while preparing to write a screenplay about a small town that was fighting Walmart. And said the company makes towns a lot of promises, and gets them to "pay for stuff," but often doesn't deliver.

He said Wal-Mart stores send their money to Arkansas rather than invest it locally, which "is not a good thing for communities."

Franken recently visited a union laborers' training center and was amazed at how well the workers were trained.

"Anyone would be crazy not to buy a place built with union labor," he said.

"We're in a downward spiral," he added. "We need to stop it, and start going back up, and this is the way to do it (while pointing at the protesters)."

Carey Young, a member of the IBEW, helped wire the Wal-Mart in Grand Rapids about 30 miles away. Each morning, he saw store employees declare, in what he called the "Wal-Mart cheer," that the customer is always number one.

On the Iron Range, union workers and their family members account for a large part of Wal-Mart's customer base, said Young.

Its decision to farm out the renovation work in Hibbing is "like a big lie, a slap in the face," he said. "I was a customer. Not anymore, because they lied to me."

IBEW official Hendrickson shares similar sentiments regarding Wal-Mart, and spoke of the risks of letting the renovation proceed with out-of-state labor.

He said if Wal-Mart in Hibbing proceeds with outsourcing the renovation work, then when the region's expected economic boom begins, other companies may "start cut-throating everybody else right out of the projects."

"When you start bringing people in from different states, where their pay isn't the same, it starts lowering our standards (of living)," he said. "So we are doing this protest to show Wal-Mart that we are not very appreciative.

"And, if possible, maybe they will change their minds before July 21, and start using more local and community-oriented contractors."

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Changes in time

■ Family business succumbs to technology and large corporations

HIBBING — Paul Aubin was swiftly forging through the maze-like hallways of Aubin Photo Studio in Hibbing — courteously flipping light switches along the way and explaining the dynamic and various operations that once took place in the region's once-premiere photo studio.

Strips of celluloid film hang from clamps, and dust-coated equipment sit eerily silent. One piece of equipment is connected to empty drums that once held the chemicals for a developer that, in 1952, was state-of-the-art. Now an antique, it had assisted in the development of 200 to 400 roles of film per day during the summer months and 25 to 50 rolls during the winter.

"This is what the predecessor to the one-hour photo used to be," Aubin explained.

The Aubin studio has adapted to many changes in film technology over the years — utilizing glass plates from 1907 to 1921 and celluloid film until about 10 years ago, when Aubin semi-retired after "negotiations" with his wife.

However, with increasing competition from large corporations, and the camera industry's transition to digital technology, Aubin said he has conceded in continuing with this adaptation.

He paused during his descent to the basement — which once held the studio his father built for him when he was nine — to talk about the dusty stacks of catalogs from companies the studio has both competed and done business with since its 1907 opening.

"In our 100 years, we have battled all kinds of competitors, most were good friends," he said. "We've outlived all of them, but we will never outlive Wal-Mart."

Aubin said he "wouldn't wish a small business on anybody" these days, including his daughter and son-in-law, who want to continue the Aubin legacy.

"If I did sell to somebody, I would be just wishing them ill will," he said.

Aubin said he loses about \$5,000 to \$13,000 per year because of inflation and competition. Although he doesn't do great deal of business nowadays, he doesn't mind showing up each day. He has the money "to throw away," and if he didn't come in, he would likely be

spending it somewhere else.

"At least here I'm blowing it, and enjoying what I'm doing," he said.

He has no qualms with allowing the studio — which has captured countless thousands of moments in regional history — to fizzle out. And doesn't openly care about what will happen to the oodles of stacked images and image negatives from moments passed, or the equipment.

"Everything has a beginning, and has an end," he said. "You can't change it." Aubin still appreciates the artistry involved with manual cameras and the technologies involved with them. He acknowledges the versatility of digital versus "straight photography," but with 70 years of experience in one technological medium, the concept of digital technology perplexes him.

"I'm an old-timer, and I really don't look at digital as photography," he said. "Anybody can pick up a digital camera, push the button and look at it and say 'Oh, I don't like it,' and shoot again."

He wants "to be at blame for what doesn't come out," and do as he desires regarding exposure.

"So if I miss one, I know who or what missed it," he said. "It's not the camera."

Aubin pointed to the images he took during Harry Truman's visit to Hibbing.

"I wasn't even mad at him at that time," he said. "He's the one who sent me to Korea."

Aubin had just returned from serving 19 months in the war, and three carloads of his buddies were "waiting to go to Side Lake, drinkin,'" he said.

He "made the mistake" of telling his father where he was going.

"Like hell you are," his father instructed. "Pick up a camera, and go tell your buddies to go drink alone. Tomorrow you'll drink with them, but not today, so you can go see who the boss is."

During the shoot, Aubin said he had to manually set the shutter speed, aperture and focus. He had to trust and believe that his decisions regarding the camera operation were sound, but he wouldn't know for sure until the developing stage — the skill and artistry he feels is being diluted with current technologies, and business models.



Photo by Jeff Warner

Paul Aubin poses in the region's on-premiere photo studio. Aubin's has been a family business for nearly 100 years. However, the legacy may end due to competition from technology changes and large corporations.

Abigail Sayre walked into the studio — seemingly drawn into a world of amazement and inspiration. She approached Aubin and asked about a lens for her camera.

She has a dream of opening a portrait studio in Hibbing within the next year. Sayre stated her appreciation for the significance of not just the older technologies that Aubin talks about, but the of the history the studio has captured over the years as well.

She made a sweeping gesture with her arm, as though including the entire treasure trove of cameras and images that decorate the store.

"This is what I want (customers) to see, only in glass cases," she said. "For me, this is where it all started."

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Funding care for the elderly - or not

■ Governor's budget may reduce service quality, access

HIBBING — Minnesota's senior care advocates say funding cuts to elder services in Gov. Tim Pawlenty's budget plan could dramatically reduce access and service quality for the state's growing elderly population.

Pawlenty backed off on some cuts in a revised budget plan released Tuesday, but advocates for the elderly at the state and local levels say there's no improvement in elder care funding over the governor's original budget plan, released in January.

The state expects to receive \$4 billion in direct federal stimulus aid, most of it for Medicaid services and education. The governor's budget channels part of this money into skilled nursing care and long-term care provided through home and community-based services.

But Geoffrey Ryan, administrator of Heritage Manor, a nursing home in Chisholm, said stimulus dollars applied to Medicaid are "really just plugging a hole."

This is because the stimulus money must be spent within two years. Advocates like Ryan say that, unless funding is found to replace it, health care needs of the elderly will be left unmet.

The governor's budget was based on the need to fill a two-year deficit of \$4.6 billion, about 13 percent of the budget. Advocates for the elderly say it includes about \$900 million of Medicaid funding that was included in the state's stimulus package.

The governor's updated budget proposal will now be analyzed by the House and Senate, where DFL lawmakers have signaled their displeasure with cuts they say would devastate health and welfare programs, especially starting in 2011, when the stimulus money runs out.

Senate Majority Leader Larry Pogemiller, DFL-Minneapolis, called Pawlenty's plan to send more money to public schools while cutting deeply into health and welfare programs "a cruel hoax on Minnesotans."

House Democrats are expected to release a budget outline Friday. Their proposal is expected to include higher taxes.

According to Aging Services of Minnesota (ASM), the governor's plans

for funding aging services could deepen an already dire funding gap. ASM, which lobbies for aging services organizations in the state, says Minnesota has the nation's fourth largest rate gap between actual health care costs and state aid, amounting to about \$23 a day per individual relying on Medical Assistance.

June Schelde, administrator of Guardian Angels Health and Rehabilitation Center in Hibbing, said providers compensate for this difference by being conservative and applying federal dollars whenever possible. However, the current focus for most skilled nursing facilities is "keeping the finger in the dike," she said.

"The primary focus of a nursing home administrator's job is, 'where do you put the Band-Aid this week?'" she said. "I think stimulus is really a bad word, because it isn't going to stimulate anything. It's just going to prohibit deeper cuts."

Schelde said quality health care depends on partnerships between health care agencies, and cuts in one area affect everybody. She likened the situation to recent layoffs in the mining industry.

"We're going to go through this same thing, only our product is human," she said.

Ryan said many believe nursing homes shouldn't be needed because people should take care of their aging family members. This isn't feasible when, for example, an 85-year-old wife attempts to consistently meet the health care needs of her 190-pound husband, he said.

Nursing homes will always play an important role, Ryan said. He also said problems with care for the aging may grow if the core issues related to senior health care aren't addressed now.

According to Aging Services of Minnesota figures, in the fiscal year ending last June 30, state funding for Medicaid services to older adults totaled \$525 million, and most of it went for nursing care and community-based alternatives to nursing homes.

The state's Medicaid spending on older adults amounted to about 17

percent of the total \$3.2 billion general fund budget for medical assistance in that year, the group's figures show.

Gayle Kvenvold, president of Aging Services of Minnesota, said about 1,100 Minnesota seniors now eligible for medical assistance would become ineligible over the next two years under the governor's budget plan.

She said providers of health services to seniors understand that "we are in extraordinary (economic) times" and "shared sacrifice" will be required. But she believes Pawlenty's budget cuts go too far.

They risk cutting services to people "who aren't going to be able to access the services they need to stay at home," she said. "And in some communities, they're not going to be able to readily access the nursing home that they need."

Schelde said Guardian Angels, the sole nursing home in Hibbing, is trying to give priority to Hibbing residents over those from elsewhere while choosing how to utilize its available beds, but this becomes more difficult as the state funding situation becomes more dire.

Kvenvold said states accepting stimulus funds cannot change eligibility requirements for nursing home residents, but they can reduce rates paid to health care providers or cut non-federally mandated services. She said the governor's budget eliminates medical assistance for three such non-mandated services for nursing home residents—dental, rehabilitation and speech therapy.

Kvenvold said once this budget crisis is overcome, the increasing number of aging people in Minnesota will create further pressure to address service quality, as well as how it's distributed and paid for.

"A crisis is a terrible thing to waste," she said. "Isn't this a time when we can look at some fundamental changes in how we provide services?"

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Nursing home closure affects community

■ Signifies changes in the health care industry

HIBBING — Marianne Anzelc prefers to keep her mother, 87, close to family. She would have considered placing her in Golden LivingCenter-Golden Crest in Hibbing, had the 67-bed nursing home facility not closed its doors in October.

She used to visit her daily at Hillcrest Alice in Hibbing, which provides services for people with Alzheimer's disease and dementia.

However, her mother endured a stroke and was later transitioned to a nursing home in Aurora because there were no nursing home beds available in Hibbing, Chisholm, Buhl or Virginia

"She was just starting to get used to it (Hillcrest Alice), and now must endure another big change," said Anzelc.

Anzelc now travels over an hour each way, once per week to visit — a challenging task, she says, but necessary to spend time with her.

She said many people in nursing home facilities either don't have family, or are in situations making it difficult to visit. Many, she said, depend heavily on bonds created with staff and other residents to compensate.

Anzelc recalls when her in-laws lived at Golden Living — the "loving nurses" and the resident who held her mother-in-law's hand while she passed away.

Her heart is especially heavy for husbands and wives who get split up, or can't see each other very often, if at all, due to the location of a nursing home..

"They're removed from anything familiar, and it's really a sad thing," she said.

Tim Bush, director of operations for Golden Living, talked about how "tough, painful and sad" it was to close the Hibbing facility, uprooting residents and employees. And tried its best to find places that would best suit the needs of the residents.

For example, a resident who had lived at Golden Living since 1968 was driven by a staff member to a facility in Florida that is closer to family.

Bush said most former Golden Living residents were relocated to facilities within 25 miles of Hibbing, with 32 in skilled nursing facilities, 11 in assisted living, three in foster care, two were transitioned to home-services and one resident passed away.

He said there are a lot of options for elderly people in the Hibbing area, and

this is evident in the company's ability to place former Golden Living residents in facilities within 30 days of the company's announcement to close.

He said the company tried everything to keep Golden Living open — from implementing private rooms, operating more efficiently, hiring staff for sales and marketing, to installing new carpeting, flooring, furniture and painting the outside, to no avail.

He also said the facility had an 80-bed capacity, was often half full and parts of the building were more than 100 years-old.

"It's not anybody's fault," said Bush. "It's not the staff's fault. It's not the town of Hibbing's fault. It's a simple circumstance we find ourselves in.

"The world changes, markets shift and people's interests change," he added.

He said Golden Living in Hibbing "would have been done a long time ago," had it not been staffed by such skilled and dedicated people. And also because the company as a whole — which operates 329 skilled nursing facilities and 17 assisted living facilities in 22 states — often made up for the financial losses being endured at the Hibbing facility.

"I know from the bottom of my heart that we tried, and we cared about what happened to residents and employees, and we helped the best we could to ease the pain of the transition," he said.

"I just hope that the community, and all the workers, know how happy we are to be part of that community and serve them as long as we did," he added.

June Schelde, administrator at Guardian Angels Health and Rehabilitation Center — the sole remaining nursing home in Hibbing that absorbed six residents from Golden Living — said nursing homes aren't what they used to be.

She said there used to be a stigma related to them, that they "are places where people go to die."

"This is untrue," she said. "(Guardian Angels) is very much home to residents."

Bush agrees, but says it's still tough to sell nursing home services to people, especially when they have an increasing number of health care options available.

"We sell something nobody wants," he said. "Nobody wants to go to a nursing home. Sometimes they have to, and we are the final choice."

He said the industry for elder care, especially in rural areas, is changing from the clinical model of traditional nursing homes to more community-based systems in home-health and assisted living-style care.

He said nursing homes have come a long way in the past 20 years regarding service quality, but are heavily regulated and expensive to maintain and operate. He added that people want to live in newer and less restrictive environments nowadays, and it's difficult to meet these demands.

When someone must choose between a nursing home and an assisted living facility that is cheaper, with fewer regulations, he said "it's like looking at a new Cadillac versus a Chevy."

He said nursing homes are somewhat limited by what they can do because services are reimbursed by state and federal dollars.

"We don't set our rates," he said. "We're told what we're going to be able to charge. So, if the state or federal government wants to build new nursing homes, they're going to have to help fund them."

Bush said a 100-bed nursing home costs around \$15 million to build. He added that about 30 percent of the nursing homes in Minnesota are losing money, and calculates that another 50 percent are making money "in the single digits."

"What you saw in Hibbing is a microcosm of what is happening throughout the entire country and the state of Minnesota," he said.

Minnesota State Rep. Tony Sertich said "it is unfair, I believe, that folks would have to drive over an hour to see their loved ones." However, there are a set number of nursing homes that are authorized for state funding.

Sertich said that after Golden Living closed, legislators made sure the available beds (regarding funding) from Golden Living were transferred to other nursing home facilities.

He said the primary concern was to ensure that local nursing homes had

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the ability to serve these seniors.

Sertich is in the process of setting up a meeting with the Minnesota Department of Health, St. Louis County Social Services and local nursing homes to assess the situation, and try to make sure no other area nursing homes shut down in the future.

He said the business model for nursing homes is challenging because health care services for elderly people are very expensive to administer, adding that about 60 percent of the nursing homes in rural Minnesota are on the verge of closing due to funding and demand issues.

He said maintaining the funding to employ nurses, physical therapists and nutritionists is more of a challenge than finding money to build a nursing home. And he doesn't foresee a new nursing home being built in Hibbing in the near future.

"If (Golden Living) couldn't make it, and it's been around for years and years, it would be difficult for others to make it," he said.

Schelde of Guardian Angels said the amount of nursing home beds in Minnesota has decreased from 45,000 to 34,000 since 1995, and this industry shift has been taking place since about 2000.

She said the change is driven largely by the baby boomer generation's mentality, which is both the runner-up for health care related to aging, as well as raised amid an era of fighting for independent rights.

"I think everybody knows that we (baby boomers) won't accept the constraints of the traditional nursing home environment for not only ourselves, but are also unwilling to accept it for our parents," she said.

Bush said "there is no way" that private companies can afford to build the

type of structures that many baby boomers want, with single rooms, private bathrooms, internet access, etc. and stay financially afloat — especially if they are placed in areas where the supply is greater than the demand.

Schelde believes that changes in the industry to more home-type settings, versus nursing homes, is a good thing because it enables people to still have some control over their lives while receiving the care they need.

"Just because you are wheelchair-bound, or need help doing a lot of the stuff many of us take for granted throughout our lives, doesn't mean you want to give up control of your daily life," she said.

"I don't think anybody should have to go to a nursing home, until they truly need 24-hour care."

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A hand up, not a hand out

■ Public housing a 'community stabilizer'

HIBBING — Larry and Lisa Taylor experience bittersweet recollections of a community-oriented environment when they visit the Haven Court public housing complex in Hibbing.

They also feel a latent dread due to memories of reliance on government assistance that often rendered them feeling both grateful and defeated at the same time.

The Taylors moved to Haven Court in 1991, and lived the first 13 years of their marriage in what some refer to as “the projects.”

Although Larry worked full-time, and most of the rent was paid via government subsidy, living paycheck to paycheck made it nearly impossible to change the family's situation.

It wasn't until they had received a mortgage loan in 2004 — which didn't require a down payment — were they able to change their living situation.

Every time they tried to get ahead financially prior to this, something would happen — whether it was a rent increase, savings drain due to a medical bill or car repair.

“We just weren't making it,” said Larry, while sitting in the kitchen of Haven Court's Family Investment Center (FAC).

He got to the point of being okay with “just having a place to live,” and “just didn't care anymore.” Then he tried again, while saying to himself: ‘I just want a better place to live.’

The cycle would then start over.

He said a lot of people living in the complex had difficulty changing their situation because they often lacked the formal education required to find higher paying jobs. And many tenants were down on themselves due to low income, broken relationships or other circumstances.

The Taylors believe resources play a significant role in the quality of people's lives, and especially in their attitudes toward where they live.

Although the apartments' innards at Haven Court were aesthetically pleasing when they moved in, they said the buildings looked like Army barracks on the outside.

There was little or no street lighting, and tenants avoided each other. It was a cold and unwelcoming environment, shunned by the outside community.

Infrastructural changes took place in 2005. New siding, the placement of outside porches and paint on doors — as well as social changes, such as luncheons, self-help programs, neighborhood parties, after-school clubs and other community-building events — literally transformed residents' lives, they

said.

Larry said the renovations and the creation of the FIC served as a heart transplant for the 100-unit complex.

According to a report recently released by the Minnesota Housing Partnership, these types of improvements to people's lives — as well as to Minnesota's \$2 billion worth of public housing — are on the decline statewide.

The report says a 29 percent decline in Minnesota's public housing capital funding from 2002 to 2007 is placing the state's 36,000 low-income people — including 12,000 children — who live in Minnesota's public housing at further risk of health and safety threats.

Anita Provinzino, executive director for Hibbing's Housing and Redevelopment Authority (HRA) — which manages Haven Court and the FAC — said although budget cuts may not be affecting Range public housing as drastically as in other parts of the state, resources definitely need to be shifted to keep complexes like Haven Court up to par.

She said much of Hibbing's public housing was built in the 1950s and 60s, and plumbing, ovens, sidewalks, carpets and other physical elements will need replacement within the next 10 years.

Provinzino referred to public housing as a “community stabilizer” because it often provides people like the Taylors with a safe place to live after a difficult life circumstance.

She said the services help many people to balance work, family and school — with the benefit of a housing subsidy that relieves pressure, while they prepare for the next season in their life.

“I hate the stereotypes (related to public housing). Everyone can make a mistake,” she said, adding that public housing “serves a huge need.”

“I think it's too easy to judge, and you haven't walked a mile in those shoes,” she added. “I think judging is something everyone is at risk of doing, myself included. I try very hard to remind myself that I haven't been there; I haven't done that.”

“If I were in those shoes, how would I like to be treated?”

Larry Taylor believes society often brushes people who are “down and out” under the rug.

“We'll just sweep them in here,” he said, referring to public housing. “Nobody will know; nobody will care.”

He believes many people maintain an “it doesn't happen in my town” mentality.

“Well, yeah it does,” he said. “Sorry.”

Many people are closer to being “on the B-

side of life,” he said. “A lot of people now are closer than they think to when disaster can put them over the edge.”

“Imagine what it would be like for you to lose your job or have a major medical disaster where you are wiped out,” he added.

Cheryl Danculovich is the support services coordinator at Haven Court's FAC.

She said many people utilize housing assistance as a means of changing their life, and “grow out of it.” And the positive impacts related to these services, and how people can grow and move on, are phenomenal, she said.

She added that everyone is a potential client when it comes to needing assistance, and anyone can become homeless “in a heartbeat.”

She told of a man who was making good money out west but moved to the Range to take care of his sick mother.

Public assistance helped him get out of the dilapidated trailer he was living in, and into a rent-subsidized apartment. He later found a job and currently pays market rent with no further assistance.

Danculovich told of a woman and her sick child living in a homeless shelter after fleeing a domestic abuse situation.

“(The child) had the diaper he had on (before fleeing), and the woman had the clothes on her back,” said Danculovich. “What do you do? Do you risk getting killed for that clothing?”

The FAC partnered with other agencies and helped her with finding a place to live, a job and medical insurance.

Danculovich said some residents are on Social Security, and live at Haven Court because they can't afford anything else — such as the woman who is living and raising her teenage daughter on \$530 per month.

“If she did not have subsidized housing, there is no way in God's green earth she would make it,” said Danculovich.

She said teenagers become homeless very easily, especially if they come from alcoholic families, or if they choose their boyfriend or girlfriend over their child. She said young people will “couch surf,” jumping from place to place until they have no other option than to seek public assistance.

“They're lost,” she said. “They're adrift; they fall through the cracks.”

Published: Hibbing Daily Tribune, June 19, 2008.

Adapted bikes help disabled children

■ 'Disability' doesn't have to mean disabled

by **Jeff Warner**
Staff Writer

BUHL — Nine years ago, Deb Lewis and Amy Daby suspected something was unique about each of their newborn children.

Lewis and Daby hadn't met, but their similar journeys had begun. It would become a trek involving the entire spectrum of human experience — from joy to confusion, denial to despair, understanding to acceptance, strength, bonding and a special friendship.

Daby's child, Bryce, was born five weeks premature. His nearly continuous sleeping for the first five months of his life was cause for alarm.

Gust, Lewis' first child, was born one week early. Afterward, she lost 34 pounds in two months due to stress from tending to a situation she didn't understand. Her son's nearly constant screaming for nine consecutive months prompted her to seek the advice of a neurologist.

"Basically, how I felt walking out that door is that 'your son has Cerebral Palsy; come and see me in three months,'" said Lewis.

"It's like, wait a minute. Now what? Where do I go? What do I do?"

Cerebral Palsy is a non-progressive disorder that stems from damage to the part of the brain that controls body movement and muscle coordination.

About 75 percent of cases are caused during pregnancy and about 5 percent during child birth, according to United Cerebral Palsy, an organization "committed to change and progress for persons with disabilities."

Daby and her husband were "positioned with the right people" after learning that Bryce had the condition. However, she, like Lewis, still felt scared and alone.

Daby said many people fall through the cracks of a society that often keeps people with disabilities in the shadows — feeling alienated and lost.

Lewis said "your whole world turns upside down when you have a child with a disability."

"Everything you thought was going to happen has now changed," she said. "It's not that it's changed for the worse, or changed so you can't do it. But it's changed enough so your dreams are not going to be the dreams you once had.

"They're going to be dreams that are new dreams, different dreams, adapted."

Adapted is just what Lewis and Daby have done, especially in regard to making certain their children experience what many take for granted — like riding a bike.

Bryce is slow-moving, and needs help with almost every element of physical functioning. Gust, although more energetic than Bryce, can keep his head up without assistance for only a few minutes.

Lewis believes that neither of them considers himself to have a disability. Therefore, she feels deep empathy while watching other children having fun in the summer sun.

For years, Daby and Lewis diligently searched for bikes they could afford — a demanding and long process, said Lewis.

"I almost threw my computer out the door a couple of times," she said, adding how frustrating it is to struggle with attaining the most basic of childhood necessities.

Daby and Lewis, who met through a day-care facility and have grown to become great friends, said one of the most challenging elements of having a disabled child is the price tag that comes with it.

Daby said anything that has "special or disability in front of it" is three to four times more expensive than "normal" things. She said this is both frustrating and sad.

Most bikes designed for disabled children are \$3,000, so they "didn't stand a chance at getting them, ever," she said.

Lewis discovered the fully adaptable Amtryke-brand bicycle in November 2006, and was elated at both its versatility and \$1,200 price tag.

Thanks to a partnership between Miller Dwan in Duluth and Access North Center for Independent Living in Hibbing, Gust and Bryce are now able to transition from their walkers to flashy red, three-wheeled bicycles that have provided a therapeutic freedom they've never experienced.

They are fully equipped with pedals attached to elastic bands that assist with constant motion, fully adaptable seats, head rests and easy-grip handlebars.

"(A bike) is a simple thing for regular children to have, and it took nine years for us to get one," said Daby. "We dreamt about it, but didn't know how it would happen.

"We were about to put the bikes on our credit cards and go wild, cause we were



Photo by Jeff Warner

Amy and Bryce Daby (left), along with Deb Lewis and her son, Gust, tell their success story of coping with the challenges of Cerebral Palsy and attaining what many take for granted.

desperate," she added "We were going to charge 'er up. We didn't care."

Lewis said it's not that they were bound and determined to get them bikes, but were rather "determined to have them be treated just like you and I...to give them the freedom to do what we can do."

The bicycles have brought newfound joy to the families, including allowing family members to see Bryce and Gust doing something besides struggling to function.

"For them to actually see (Bryce) on a bike, they were in tears," said Daby.

Gust was able to participate in the Fourth of July parade in Mountain Iron with his sister. Neighborhood kids now ask if they can ride bikes with Bryce and Gust.

"I don't cry that often, but to see his dad take him up the hill and back down was probably the first time in (Gust's) entire life that I felt he had accomplished everything he wanted, because he can do it," said Lewis.

"Just because your dreams are different doesn't mean you have to stop dreaming."

Published: Hibbing Daily Tribune, Nov. 30, 2008, and also chosen by the Associated Press for its national wire.

New sense of pride in his stride

■ Man benefits from robotic ankle, foot

HIBBING — On Feb. 9, 2006, Chad Lavalley stood atop a cabinet placed in the back of a work truck.

The torch he was using was similar to those tucked away in the storage space below — tools he didn't know were leaking fuel that would soon ignite and rearrange the lower portion of his right leg, along with his life, forever.

Lavalley has since embarked on a dynamic journey of personal growth — from nightmares involving the random explosion of inanimate objects, such as pencils and toilet paper rolls, to the physical challenges from a two-year stint of being nearly “down and out” immobile, to the difficult decision of having a portion of his limb amputated and replaced by the world's first micro-processor-driven foot and ankle, which he has had since May 2008.

Lavalley, 32, visited Hanger Prosthetics and Orthotics in Hibbing last Wednesday. He was there to assist local amputees with reaching the high levels of independence and mobility he's grown to experience.

He sat in a chair and pushed a button located on the front side of his prosthetic — a beeping sound ensued, and it switched to “relax mode.”

So, what's it like to live life without the foot you were born with?

“I can tell you how you can relate,” said Lavalley. “When you're in the shower, stand on one foot for awhile and try to wash up. When you sit down, try to get up with one foot. You'll get an idea of what we go through.”

Lavalley was asked if he feels like his foot is still there.

He looked down and said his foot was moving, in his mind. His leg bones were also moving, but there was no foot to respond.

Some say they feel physical pain, even though the nerves or the limb are no longer there.

“Oh, phantom pains? They just happen all on their own, whenever they want,” he said.

“It's weird. It's hard to explain phantom pains. It could go from itching, or it feels like it itches, so you just move your leg around and it'll quit.”

Lavalley's decision to have his foot amputated came neither lightly nor quickly. He embarked on nine surgeries

in one year, followed by a continued “pins and needles” experience with each step. It was nearly impossible for him to walk more than the length of a small room or about 15 feet.

His ankle “locked up” once, causing him to tumble down a flight of stairs leading to the basement of his Aurora home. He tore his hamstring, anterior cruciate ligament (ACL) and posterior cruciate ligament (PCL).

“So I didn't have any good legs,” he said.

His decision to amputate followed a family trip to Hawaii, where his “old leg” inhibited him from participating in activities with his wife and children.

“It was a pain,” he said. “I was tired. I couldn't move anymore. My foot was burning. After we got back, that was it for me.

“We couldn't do anything together,” he added. “I couldn't run with them. I couldn't do anything with them.”

He felt like a “dead-beat dad.”

“These guys aren't having any fun,” he told himself, regarding his family. “And I'm sure as hell not going to hold them back. So, I'll cut it off.”

“Anything was better than what I had,” he added.

Lavalley went for weeks at a time without talking about the looming decision whether to amputate on his mind—second-guessing himself. The doctors told him to “either amputate, or deal with” a life of pain and near immobility.

“I was scared out of my mind,” he said. “It's just the fact that when I woke up, it was going to be done. There's no turning back. It was difficult.

“You either deal with a foot that's real crappy, or you deal with a foot you know nothing about, and hopefully it's going to work out,” he added. “It's kind of a gamble.”

After the surgery, Lavalley struggled to adapt. However, the words of a woman who lost her leg in a motorcycle accident helped him move forward to a new tier of strength and life experience.

“There's so much more you can do (with your life),” she told him. “Don't just sit back and let it defeat you.”

He said the woman expressed her previous concerns regarding body image, in conjunction with the loss of her leg. She encouraged him to not be-



Photo by Jeff Warner

Chad Lavalley had the lower part of his right leg amputated, after he was “blown up” in a February 2006 industrial accident.

come a psychological victim of his condition.

Now...

“Ever since I got my (new) leg, I've worn nothing but shorts, rain or shine,” said Lavalley. “I just put it out there. Then I don't have to be asked and people don't need to stare at me.”

Now that he's learned to function with a prosthetic limb that analyzes his movements up to 1,600 times per second, Lavalley can do just about everything he was able to do before the accident.

“One of the big hurdles was trying to figure out where this thing is at, so I didn't go down on my face,” he said.

Lavalley doesn't allow anything to hold him back from being young, healthy and strong — regardless of what people tell him he can or can't do.

“Don't quit,” he said. “Don't let anybody ever tell you that you can't do it.”

He now cherishes his newfound freedom and appreciation for life, especially not living in pain every day. He's learned to take life slow, because “it takes two seconds to get hurt; it takes a lifetime to heal,” he said.

“I'm loving it, compared to where I was,” he added. “This isn't going to slow me down. This is just another step.”

Published: Hibbing Daily Tribune, Dec. 15, 2008.

Range vet receives purple heart(s)

■ Former commanding officer pays it forward

HIBBING — Moments before Ron Backstrom was given two Purple Hearts at Hibbing's VFW Post 8510 on Thursday, he listened as Michael Holroyd turned back the clock nearly 40 years.

Holroyd, Backstrom's former Vietnam platoon commander in the 23rd Americal Division of the 196th Light Infantry Brigade, had driven from Kansas, and was about to give two of his three Purple Hearts to Backstrom.

Why?

"Cause I'm getting ready to croak, and I didn't want to without him at least getting a chance to get what he deserves," said Holroyd, in an interview.

Previously, with hands and voice trembling at times, Holroyd explained, in stirring detail, two snapshots in time — moments that Holroyd said justify giving Backstrom the Purple Heart medals, a high honor and awarded to military personnel who are wounded or killed in combat situations.

In March 1969, while advancing on a hill in Vietnam, Holroyd and Backstrom's platoon came under heavy land mine, grenade and machine gun fire. They attempted to back down the hill, but they, and the platoons behind them, were receiving 57mm recoilless rifle fire from the North Vietnamese Army (NVA).

Holroyd, the platoon's lieutenant, said his commander ordered him to fire at the top of the hill and continue upward, "along with Ron Backstrom." He said the platoon made several efforts to take the hill but became surrounded by well dug-in NVA.

They fought for eight days and nights at this location — mortared every 15 minutes for three days and nights. Holroyd said they had called in large guns on their position, and "at great personal risk to everyone, because every night..."

He paused, gulped down half the whiskey in a shot glass, and continued.

"They tried to overrun us until the end," he said, with a slight stutter.

Holroyd said his soldiers had little or no reinforcements, ammunition, food or water for days.

They stacked up bodies around their foxholes and bunks to make the holes deeper because of the soil conditions.

A napalm strike was ordered, but called off because the platoon was too close to the enemy. But the air strike was again ordered, because without it "they were going to die anyway," said Holroyd.

"When the napalm shells fell, they first

sucked all of the air out of our lungs, and then we took the hill," he said.

Everyone was affected to a maximum degree by terror, thirst, hunger and "the loss of buddies. But somehow, we endured," he added.

"Ron upheld the most dignity, courage and fighting spirit in any battle," Holroyd said. "Without him, we may have been overrun, completely. I depended on him much more than the others."

Holroyd was also wounded, along with most members of the Brigade.

"I do not know why (Backstrom) didn't receive his Purple Heart, 'cause I know he got hit with me," he said. "He was right beside me."

He attributed Backstrom not receiving his medals largely to a new medic who was flustered and didn't know the proper procedures.

Backstrom said in an interview that many things are going on before, during and after a firefight. He didn't appear to harbor animosity toward the medic.

"When you're in a firefight, what are you going to do?" he said. "Dig out your pen and start writing stuff down?"

Holroyd told the crowd lining the saloon section of the VFW of another incident for which he believes Backstrom should receive a Purple Heart.

Holroyd said he received a priority helicopter medevac call because they were the closest to a battle scene.

They landed in "a very hot area" being held by the platoon that Holroyd was formerly the lieutenant, and of which Backstrom was still a member.

He said Backstrom was loaded onto the helicopter, with a bayonet wound through his foot.

"I'll be damned if you can get any closer than that in a battle," he said.

Backstrom, sitting on a stool, broke into tears and was comforted by the gentle touch of a male friend.

"Ron Backstrom should have received another Purple Heart," said Holroyd.

He said many records were misplaced or inaccurate because soldiers in Vietnam came and went one at a time, so "no one ever knew exactly when they were going to leave, and when they were going to come back, or if they were going to come back."

Holroyd has been trying for some time to "straighten out" Backstrom's military records and has filed the formal paperwork, to no avail.



Photo by Jeff Warner

Ron Backstrom received two Purple Hearts from his former Vietnam commanding officer, Michael Holroyd, at Hibbing's VFW Post 8510 on Thursday. Holroyd drove from Kansas to pay forward two of his three Purple Hearts, after learning Backstrom hasn't received "the medals he deserves."

After Holroyd talked about his Uniform Military Code of Justice rights as an officer in the United States Army, he said, "assume the position, soldier."

"I suppose I have to," said Backstrom. "You're my lieutenant."

Holroyd said, "Today I am!"

"This guy saved my life," said Backstrom, as he walked toward Holroyd. "And you know why he saved my life? So I could save his."

After Holroyd pinned the medals on the left side of Backstrom's gray shirt, he addressed the crowd.

"If it wasn't for him, I wouldn't be here," he said. "He keeps saying that maybe I saved his life, and maybe I did, but we saved each other."

"You work together as a team, and that's how we're here," he added.

After lunch, and the "atmosphere" was right, Backstrom sat at a table and let his shoulders fall slightly.

"When you go through that (combat), and you don't get the medal, you already know what you went through," he said. "This is just a piece of material. This is it, up here (pointing at his head)."

"It's nice to have them, but all of the meaning is in your head," he added. "Sure it's nice to have the medals and put them on your wall at home, but what's going on up here (again pointing at his head), that's where the medals are."

Published: Hibbing Daily Tribune, July 11, 2008.

National country singer to perform

■ Talks about life, his career and how 'we're all in the same boat'

John Berry delighted in the golden brown leaves surrounding him, as he wore flip-flops, a t-shirt and jeans. There was a "full moon comin' up," and he admired the concrete slab recently poured for his soon-to-be built home in Georgia.

He excused himself from the phone and asked his son what string was missing on an acoustic guitar. He then talked candidly about his other son, a base guitar player, who Berry says is "exceptional enough" to tour with his band.

Berry and his family have lived in a double-wide trailer for three years, after they sold their house to live on 32 acres of country land.

The bottom fell out of the housing and credit markets soon afterward, he said. And although he has been cutting records for 30 years, has 21 albums — with a slew of hit songs having been played on the radio — he had anticipated to be denied for a mortgage.

"Being a self-employed entertainer, they're not really keen on giving you a mortgage," he said, adding how surprised he is to have received the mortgage approval.

"All we (he and his wife) could think about is how faithful God is to provide," he added.

He's learned while traveling that "a lot of people think they're alone," but "we're all in the same dog gone boat; it's just the way it is," he said.

Berry is excited to experience the further construction of his home, after the Dec. 22 completion of his fourteenth national Christmas tour.

This year's tour began last weekend with a performance in Ohio. However, he's "fixing to go" on a 12,000-mile trip, using an older-model tour bus he's hoping will make it through performances in Canada, the west coast of the United States, Tennessee, Michigan, Indiana and Minnesota — including a local performance at the Reif Center in Grand Rapids on Dec. 2, beginning at 7:30 p.m.

The first half of the performance consists of about 15 of his hit songs, including "Standing on the Edge of Goodbye" and "Your Love Amazes Me." He and his band perform Christmas songs the second half that include classics such as "O Holy Night," "The Christmas Song" and "Little Drummer Boy."

"This is not a holiday show," said Berry. "This is a God loved us so much he sent Jesus to be born to Mary and Joseph, lived

33 years, died on the cross, rose again, ascended to heaven and is coming back again for us one day Christmas tour."

He became interested in performing at the Reif Center after singing at a fan's surprise 25th wedding anniversary in Grand Rapids several years ago.

"The whole community knew about his performance, except the man's wife," said Berry, with a laugh.

He added that he saw the Reif Center while at the party, and worked to make it part of his Christmas tour.

This tour stems from Christmas performances that he, his wife and others had performed for about eight years at their church, initially during the 1980s. However, the performance didn't become an annual project until after he underwent brain surgery in 1994.

He said radio stations at the time were playing songs from a couple of his records, and were "wildly supportive" while he recovered from the challenging experience.

Berry said he recorded a heartfelt rendition of "O Holy Night" during an almost overwhelmingly emotional time following his surgery, and sent it to the radio stations as a single — not intended to be aired, but to thank them for support, he said.

The song was aired and the Christmas tours began, along with his propelled success as an artist.

Berry said although he's written some songs, he prefers to utilize the musical strengths of his friends, who are "really serious song writers."

"That's just not my gift," he said. "My gift is to stand on stage and let the meanings of the songs come across. I can make those songs my own, and I use that song to tell the story. That's what I love to do; I love to sing for people.

"To me, the art of recording is how much emotion can you create in a room, around a song, and capture it," he added. "And then 10 years later, someone in Minnesota can listen to it and still feel it. Now that's recording."

Berry cut his first independent album in 1979 — with three to follow — in a small recording studio located in the basement of his parents' house.

He produced another album at a studio in Athens, Georgia in 1986, and another at a Nashville studio in 1990. He landed a record deal with Capital Records in 1994 — where he produced a number of hit songs through



Photo submitted

John Berry will perform at the Reif Center in Grand Rapids at 7:30 p.m. on Dec. 2.

1998.

He was released from Capitol Records after the label president who signed him retired. Since the new president wasn't going to make money from Berry's projects, he signed other artists instead.

Regardless, Berry has signed with other record labels since, and has had a wildly successful career — with multiple gold and platinum albums, nominations from the Country Music Association, the Academy of Country Music and the Grammy's. He also performed at one of President George H. Bush's birthday parties.

Berry said although he's had much fun performing over the years, his career has not come without its trials. However, he neither tires of being on the road, nor performing for people.

"I love it; I love it," he said, adding that "there's just something about pulling into a town" early in the morning, setting up and performing for people.

"I was on my bus today saying, 'Come on, let's go for a ride, baby. Let's just drive around the block.'"

Published: Hibbing Daily Tribune, Nov. 16, 2008 in "Tailings," arts, entertainment and community events.

Former Snocross champ off to Alaska

■ Returns to defend Iron Man race title

HIBBING — You're sitting atop your idling snowmobile. A ski-rope handle attached to a bungee cord the size of a small fire hose lies by your side. Although you can't see around the corner, your partner is skiing down the mountainside at 60 mph, trusting you to be prepared for perfect unison and cooperation.

You mentally drift off for a second — the calm before the storm. Suddenly, your partner comes skipping sideways on the snow as she rounds the corner, and is now heading toward you. The time is right, so you quickly make a fist with your right hand and pin the throttle to the bar.

The sled's skis lift off the ground, and an arc of snow decorates the landscape behind your sled as you quickly accelerate to the speed of your partner. You back off on the throttle as your partner glides up to your side; the ski-handle is passed on. You accelerate a bit, and the slack in the rope is eliminated.

A nonverbal moment of understanding takes place, and the snowmobile's carburetors are opened fully. The sled's engine growls as it's pushed to the limit.

Your partner drops into a tuck position, as though water skiing on a wavy lake. For the next couple of minutes, you zoom at speeds of up to 90 mph — speeding up and slowing down, careening around 90-degree corners, dodging rocks and trying to beat the clock. After all, you and your partner are defending the course record.

About 2.5 miles later, you reach the summit. As you cross the gate and begin to slow, your partner — as though a boulder in the pocket of an industrial-sized slingshot — uses the bungee cord to launch forward and over the edge of a nearly vertical drop. Your job is complete, but the race is not.

Seconds later, the entire feat is completed as your partner speeds across the finish line at 70 m.p.h. All of this happened amid just over five miles and in about four minutes.

This is roughly what Julie Thul from Side Lake, Minn. will experience on April 11, as she drives a snowmobile in the 2008 Arctic Man Ski and Sno-Go

Classic in Summit Lake, AK.

Thul, a former national and world Snocross champion, raced for Team Polaris for seven years. Although she hung up the gear on her professional racing career in 2005, the Arctic Man race is something she still looks forward to.

"This is extra," she said, with a sly smile and a sparkle in her eyes. "I feel like all of the years I've raced professionally have added up to me being able to do this every year, and it's worth it."

Thul and her current racing partner, Aurora DeMaulmon from France, are part of a team called "Global Fuel." The overall team consists of five two-person teams — one women's skiing and two snowboarding teams, as well as two men's ski-teams.

This will be the fifth year Thul will embark on a week of training, racing and spending time with friends, consisting primarily of world-class athletes.

"Just hanging out is what the race is all about," Thul said. "The team, friends, snowmobiling, snow and sun."

Thul was introduced to the Iron Man race in 2004, after becoming the world Snocross champion. A former Team Polaris mechanic, who had moved to Alaska and discovered the race, told Global Fuel's owner of Thul's racing abilities.

Although Thul knew little about the race, her addiction to new challenges helped her oblige to an invitation. Upon arrival in Alaska, she was paired with Julie Pierre LaClerc, a World Cup skier.

She and LaClerc entered both the men and women's classes. Thul said they asked the men if they could double-enter, as long as they paid both of the hefty entry fees.

"And (the men) were like, 'oh yeah, all the more money in the pot,'" Thul said.

She and LaClerc shattered the women's record by over 20 seconds, setting a new record that she and DeMaulmon are still defending.

Thul joked about the duo also taking third in the men's division that year — taking money from the men's pot, rather than just adding to it. Thul also received the "top gun award" for the



Photo submitted

Julie Thul, former national and world snocross champ will be on her way to Alaska on April 4, to compete in the Iron Man Ski and Sno-Go Classic.

fastest canyon pull.

What gives her the edge she needs to be successful at racing, and in the Arctic Man?

"Knowing that I can do it, the challenge of it," she said. "The combination of (Arctic Man) being a snow machine race and a skiing race in one.

"I do it definitely because it's different," she added.

Thul has been training for the last couple of weeks by running and working out at the gym. However, she hasn't driven a snowmobile since last year's Arctic Man race. Although she feels unprepared right now, she's confident this won't be the case by race day.

What is a race for Julie Thul?

"A race is something that's a challenge," she said "I'm not going to race you a block if I know I'm going to smoke you. What's the point?"

"(Arctic Man) isn't even a race; it's an event," she later added. "It's all about snowmobiling, the surroundings. It's a big event that goes on, where Iron Man just happens to be the race."

Published: Hibbing Daily Tribune, Sports, April 3, 2008.

A rally call for a prosperous Iron Range

■ College professor writes book about the area's past, present and future

"Overburden: Modern Life on the Iron Range" is a "rally call" for Range generations — both present and future — to forge ahead with due diligence during a time of unique opportunity.

The 239-page book is part memoir — as author Aaron Brown weaves his life history into the multifaceted socioeconomic fabric of the Iron Range — and part history book, as he poignantly puts times past into perspective with the present and an unformed future.

With a heavy dose of humor, Brown says he points out "the serious things, but never loses sight of the lighter side of living on the Range."

"I make sure people eat their broccoli, but I put lots of cheese on it to make it fun," he said, with a laugh.

He said "Overburden" is merely a metaphor for how important it is to dig beneath the surface of modern Range life, and recover the elements of a richness that permeates every element of it. This, Brown says, is key to attaining a vision of the endless possibilities that lie ahead on the Range.

The central message:

"This is an area that has endured a lot, changed a lot; and if it is to exist further, will continue to do these things," said Brown. "It will continue to be difficult, and exciting, and change will happen.

"If we are wise, and continue to use what we have learned (throughout Range history), we have a chance to go through this change with open eyes, and create something we want."

Brown seeks to inspire Rangers to carve through the challenges of today, utilizing tools attained from the rigors and blessings of a dynamically tumultuous history.

"We (Range residents) are a people with a proud past, and a future of our own making," said Brown. "The central idea of getting one generation up and out of diapers, up and out into the world to do something, is the central idea of who we are."

Brown added that "we are a great area facing the challenges of aging out of our adolescence," And now, during prospective hopes for new developments, is the time to get back to the basics of what makes this area unique.

He said reinstating the "let's get this done" mentality that once bubbled from

the labor victories that were forged by blood in this area, is key to reinvigorating the social and economic vitality of an area that has left a significant impact on the world.

"If we're going to be this area where things start happening again, unless we have the fire (to be socially involved), we are setting ourselves up to be exploited in the same way our great-grandfathers and grandmothers were when they came to this country," said Brown.

The book delves into how the Range thrived for decades amid great economic vitality — how the mines provided good-paying jobs that were sought by thousands — as well as how this blissful existence ceased with the 1980s collapse of the steel market.

Peering through a sociological lens, Brown talks about how this affected people — and created a "this is a place with no future" culture that believed in order to succeed in life, one must leave the Range.

Brown grew up in the 1980s, and said "all you knew was decline, and all you saw was the ugliness that occurs when decline happens."

"It wasn't cool to stay on the Range," he added. "You stayed on the Range if you were a failure, and you went if you were successful was the general mentality that permeated everybody and everything."

Brown challenges folks to envision life past this era in Range history, and deems the Range as "a ladder to the sky kind of place."

"We don't ever want to let up on the idea that the Range is a place that elevates people, first," he said.

Brown says the unique nature of this area — from its social functioning to its weather patterns — has created a bubble that previous cultures living here have viewed "with a sense of awe; this 'it's special and we don't know why (mentality).'"

"It's a blessing in that it has protected us from homogenization; it's kept our culture alive; it has protected our own in many cases," he said. "And the negatives are that you are unaware that there is this whole other world out there, and you don't address your faults and what could be fixed."

He said a new cycle related to immigra-



Photo by Jeff Warner

Author Aaron Brown writes a book about the Range's roots and potential future.

tion and economics has begun on the Range, and this is evident with an anticipated influx of people related to the Essar Steel mine under construction, and this influx "will likely include people from other countries.

"The true people of this land are not just the people who are native-born, but the ones who choose to post their flags here, and work diligently to make the area survive," said Brown.

He added that "the hard part for us Rangers is going to be that we are going to have to make open our minds and hearts, that some of the people who take this pledge may not be born here."

Brown talked about the benefits of a lifestyle on the Range, where the value of people — both in terms of talent and work ethic — is cultivated and brought forth in full force, once again.

"The whole point of living here is that it's not guaranteed to be easy," he said. "Every society that has ever lived in this area has learned that there are great challenges, and has figured out a way to meet those challenges in a truly innovative and interesting way.

"If you can make it here and enjoy your life, you can make it anywhere."

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There will be an opening event for "Overburden: Modern Life on the Iron Range" from 5 to 7 p.m. on Thursday, Oct. 16, at Howard Street Booksellers in Hibbing.

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