

'Three Cups' author shares his vision with packed house

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Clayton Pioneer

The sheer volume of people proved to be almost overwhelming as author Greg Mortensen came to St. Bonaventure Church in Concord last month.

A large turnout had been expected for the "Three Cups of Tea" author, certainly more than Clayton Books owner Joel Harris knew could fit in his bookstore. As people waited to be let in, the line stretched around the church parking lot. An estimated 1,000 people filled the sanctuary, sitting on the carpet leading up to the podium, lining the aisles and along the windows.

Mortensen tours frequently to support Pennies for Peace, which raises funds to continue his work building schools in poor areas of Pakistan and Afghanistan. Even he was surprised by the number of people at the Nov. 7 event.

"I used to be nervous speaking to larger groups," he confid-

ed moments before he took the stage.

Though a tall man, Mortensen presents himself in a gentle way. He's soft spoken, humble and respectful to those who have gathered to see him.

As the crowd filtered into the sanctuary, Mortensen chat-

ted with well-wishers, some of whom urged him for early autographs of their books. As his lecture began, the crowd rose for a standing ovation.

A multimedia video featured his daughter, Amira, explaining that Mortensen's mother was a principal at Westside Elementary

in Wisconsin. There, kids had brought in pennies as a fundraiser. One boy, Jamie, proudly announced: "Even though you're only 8, you can do 62,300 pennies."

"That was \$623.40, my father's largest single donation amount," Amira said of the

early fund-raising efforts.

Mortensen told how he has built dozens of schools in Pakistan and Afghanistan. At first, he struggled to obtain funding and awareness for what many consider a region that cultivates terrorists. After soliciting celebrities and the established elite in a mail campaign, he received a single response: a \$100 donation from news anchor Tom Brokaw.

It was only after the Pennies for Peace program started and children raised money one penny at a time that the public began to see the value of Mortensen's plan. "In Pakistan," he announced, "some kids would have to walk three hours to get to school."

Mortensen explained that in Pakistan and Afghanistan, children talk to their parents and their cultural history is passed along orally. "We don't have a rich oral tradition," he said. "It's a great tragedy for us."

After spending his early days in Africa, where his father founded a hospital and his

mother started schools, Mortensen has continued the service tradition. A life-changing event led Mortensen to realize his true purpose.

When his youngest sister died in her sleep from an epileptic attack, he decided to honor her memory by climbing K-2, putting him on the path toward enlightenment.

"It was a Muslim man who helped me when I was very weak," Mortensen said. "He gave me some green tea and baking soda and took me to his home. You were considered a friend after sharing a second cup of tea and, after the third, one was considered family."

Mortensen learned that one-third of the children in the region die before reaching their first birthday. This was another reason he wanted to make a difference.

"I feel really blessed," he said. "If you can have hope, you can really do anything, can't you?"

By their vigorous applause, the audience agreed.



Greg Mortensen greets a well wisher in the audience prior to the presentation.

André Gensburger/Clayton Pioneer

Wine, from page A1

different cooling temperatures. "Cooler, longer ferments are better," Albert said. "I get much better control over the process."

The barrels are all placed within a temperature-controlled giant locker, packed full. "Space is a premium here, and so we tend to use everything."

His first vintage in 2002 received excellent reviews from customers and restaurants. This from 2-year-old grapes – a rarity.

"It's unheard of for 2-year-old grapes to be good enough," he noted. "Wines need to not only have a great expression, but also have a pleasing aftertaste that lingers. Of course, it needs to be food friendly, as well. This takes lots of time and patience."

LEARNING A NEW TRADE

Albert comes from a family of contractors. His father, a general contractor also named Sterling, resisted the idea of his son putting everything he owned into building the winery. He has since decided that his son's wines are good. His sister is a painting contractor, while his brother Steve, now a partner in the winery, is a respected design contractor with a business bearing his name.

Albert had his own profitable landscape engineering business, but it did not satisfy him, personally.

"I had to build my next career," Albert said. "I wanted

to be with the vines – I get energy from that. My favorite part is the actual growing of the grapes, from sprout to harvest."

However, Albert discounts the romantic imagery of owning a vineyard expressed by more and more Americans. "Join a wine club," he said. "It's as close as a sane person wants to come to owning a winery."

With vineyards on the northern edge of the Mt. Diablo range and the Russian River and Alexander valleys in Sonoma County, the winery is able to produce 11 varietals a year. The Mangini/Albert Vineyard grows cabernet sauvignon, syrah, zinfandel and sangiovese, while the Russian River Valley provides merlot, syrah and zinfandel grapes. The Alexander Valley grapes are made into cabernet sauvignon, cabernet franc, malbec, petit and verdot.

'THIS IS A DREAM'

Eleven years after he started planning, after the course work at UC Davis and the negotiations for vineyard space, planting his own grapes and nurturing them for production, Albert retains the same sense of wonder and peace that drew him into the business.

"This is a dream, when you get to build this and do this," he said.

"All my life, I have grown plants – from a backyard garden as a child to collecting and growing orchids for Rod

McCellen orchid farm, as well as my own small orchid nursery. As a landscape and engineering contractor, I've continued my love for nurturing plants."

In 1996, he and his brother Steve took a trip to a large winery for a "day in the life adventure" and he realized he was "hooked." The opportunity to build a big vineyard was realized in 1998, as Albert became a vineyard partner with Richard and Karen Mangini. His job was to prep and plant the vines.

"You have to understand the complexity of wine," he said. "Outside of human blood, wine is perhaps the second most complex, filled with organisms that affect every aspect of the flavor profile. Even the yeast will come back if it's not controlled properly."

Albert, a self-labeled "control-freak," knows that his dedication to the art of winemaking is responsible for much of the success he has experienced. In 2004, he won a silver for his cabernet sauvignon and a bronze for his merlot at the San Francisco International Wine Competition. Winning a total of six silver medals and three bronze medals in the 2007 wine competitions, the winery also was featured in *Wine Enthusiast*.

"I make wine that I like to drink, or my wife likes to drink," he said, confessing to being too critical to enjoy other wines when he dines out. "I generally bring my own wine."

His wife, Yanira, however, will experiment and tells her husband when she finds a wine she likes. He also hopes that his

two daughters, Delen, 9, and Jesenia, 10, might follow in the family business.

"Delen likes the lab," he said. "Jesenia likes to come to the vineyards."

QUALITY OVER QUANTITY

Albert makes 6,000-7,000 cases yearly and does not plan to expand the quantity. "It's all about the quality," he said.

He knew going in that he would need 3,000-5,000 cases a year in order to be profitable. With 27 acres of grapes under his direct control, as well as 11 acres in Alexander Valley, he is happy with his estate-grown fruit.

"It was 68 days this year from harvest to the finished product, working four to 12 hour days with no break. My nephew tells me that I get into a carbon dioxide coma," he said.

Albert hopes to attract more local traffic to his winery. The industrial park setting is difficult to find – hardly the romantic imagery patrons expect of a winery. While his wine is readily available at retail locations, with tastings at art and wine festivals in Clayton and Walnut Creek, Albert would like to expand his interaction with the public and increase awareness of the winery tasting room.

"A lot of us (local winemakers) are discussing trying to set up a common wine tasting shop in Concord," he added. "It's in the planning stages."

In the meantime, the winery is open 1-5 p.m. Saturdays and Sundays, by appointment, and Albert welcomes the opportunity to introduce local residents

to his award-winning wines. The winery also offers a wine club.

"There is an old winemaker joke," he said, referring to the complexity of all facets of the

business. "The difference between God and winemakers? God doesn't think He's a winemaker."

For more information, visit www.sawinery.com.

Check out these great gift ideas from the Library Foundation

The Clayton Community Library Foundation has several gift suggestions for teachers, neighbors or family friends.

You can buy a brick, which will be installed along the walkway leading to the library from Clayton Road. Cost is \$55 for three lines of engraving, 20 characters per line. A new order will be placed in early January. Gift cards are available.

Another wonderful gift is a book bag in heavy-duty red canvas with white printing and logo. The bottom is gusseted and stands easily for filling. These bags are a bargain at \$10. The bags also could be used as wrapping for a special gift that is hard to wrap.

Patrons can purchase a book "In Honor of" or "In Memory of" a special person. Fiction books can be purchased for \$25 or non-fiction for \$50. Gift cards are available, and a bookplate will be placed in the book.

Another option is a membership in the Clayton Community Library Foundation at \$10 for an individual and \$15 for a family, as well as several higher categories. This is a gift that any library/book lover is sure to appreciate.

Lovely earrings by local woodworker Ted Holmsen are available for \$5 per pair. Come in and take a look.

"Clayton Cooks..." features recipes by locals such as Gregg and Joan Manning, Joan Culver, Susan Fossan and Skip Ipsen. Cost is \$5.

T-shirts sporting the 94517 logo are available in red and blue in a variety of sizes. Cost is \$14 for adult shirts and \$10 for children's.

Any purchase benefits the library, with proceeds going to purchase new materials. For more information, stop by the library or visit www.claytonlibrary.org.



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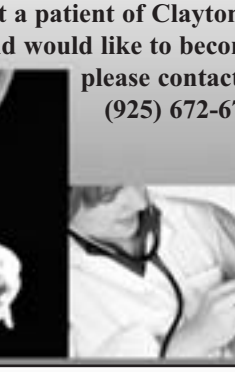

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