

Dane of the Year 2026



Our Dane of the Year for 2026 has been an active volunteer at DAC for many years and she has deep roots in the community. When she retired from teaching in 2012, she took the opportunity to become more involved. She is the third generation in her family to give volunteer service at Danebo, the Danish American Fellowship and now the Danish American Center. Her grandmother even lived at Danebo for a time. Her parents Rolf & Soli Kirkegaard both served on the board and she has followed their tradition of board service beginning in 2022.

She is head of the Archive project and has been organizing, researching and caring for our historic documents as part of the Heritage Committee. In the past 3 years she has catalogued over 150 documents that now can be searched from our online catalog. This includes measuring, writing descriptions, photographing or scanning the objects, labelling with accession

numbers, preparing for storage using archival materials, recording location, and uploading to the database MnCollections.org, our collection website. She makes our history accessible to the public. The first objects she entered when we started online were old Danebo Home newsletters so people could find a record of their family member's involvement going back to 1924. Before the catalog project she helped organize exhibitions about our history and wrote articles, including about her grandparents Peter & Ingeborg Kirkegaard who were very active in the Danish community. Her grandfather Peter has been featured in exhibits here as the conductor of the Danish men's chorus. Her grandmother was their accompanist.

Her grandmother, Ingeborg Kirkegaard was a charter member of Virkelyst and now she is the President and organizer of this activity group, sending meeting notices, making meeting arrangements and serving as MC at the Virkelyst Julefrokost luncheon.

She serves on the Aebleskiver breakfast committee and has for years, often with her husband, setting tables, serving, and cleaning up for the hundreds of people who come to the nine breakfasts we offer a year, one of our biggest fundraisers.

She organized Open Doors for several years when we participated in that community effort.

Every time we have a call for volunteers she steps up as a willing volunteer for so many events ...Danish Day, Julefrokost, clean up day... and she is volunteering today. And volunteering with her daughter carrying the tradition to 4 generations.

Two of her most endearing qualities are her optimism and generosity of spirit. She is always the first to congratulate others and see the bright side in any situation.

Please join me in honoring Ginny Leppart, Dane of the Year 2026.

2025

Our Danes of the Year are a couple who have been involved with the Danish American Center and other Danish organizations for many years.

They have been active board members and supporters of the Danish American Center, Rebild National Park Society and the Upper Midwest Rebild Scholarship.

Both were educated at the Royal Veterinary and Agricultural University in Copenhagen before they formed a business in Minnesota together in 1985. In addition to running their Shamrock Veterinary Hospital, he is an adjunct instructor at the University of Minnesota College of Veterinary Medicine and she was a faculty member from 1985-2003. They live on a farmstead in Rosemount, where they share their lives with three rowdy terriers, three mischievous cats, and three comfortably retired horses. When time allows, they enjoy traveling, gardening, searching for antiques, and spending time with their two energetic granddaughters.

We are most appreciative of the many years they have hosted a traditional Sankt Hans at their farm in Rosemount. This annual midsummer celebration welcomes all DAC members for a late afternoon potluck picnic, hayrides and fellowship followed by songs around an enormous bonfire and burning the witch.

Please join me in celebrating our Danes of the Year, Kurt and Patricia Walter-Hansen



Kurt & Patricia Walter-Hansen



Loraine Jensen

Every year we open nominations for Dane of the Year to our members and we have so many worthy candidates it is hard to choose. This year we decided to add a new award to recognize not only members who make a great contribution to DAC through Dane of the Year, but also those who make an impact in the community at large.

In that vein we present the **Danish American Center Community Impact Award to Loraine Jensen.**

Loraine's family background is thoroughly Danish. Her mother grew up around Harlan and Elk Horn, Iowa, and her father moved from Tomah, Wisconsin, to Elk Horn after high school to work as a farmhand for a relative, where he met her mother.

They were married in the Elk Horn Lutheran Church then moved to a farm in Nebraska where Loraine grew up. She has lived most of her adult life in Alexandria, Minnesota.

She is the founder, former president, and now Executive Director, of the American Association for Runic Studies.

She established this nonprofit organization after earning a Master's in Public Affairs degree from the Humphrey Institute at the University of Minnesota.

In 2017, Loraine began leading groups on periodic "Rune Rounds" — and has led groups to Scandinavia. These field trips allow rune enthusiasts (sometimes playfully called runatics) to view runestones in remote rural settings as well as museum collections.

Loraine also has close professional ties with other runologists in northern Europe and she has established connections with experts in related fields such as Viking-era archaeology, art history, and geology, and she is well connected with museum specialists in Scandinavia.

She makes presentations about runestones to various organizations.

Her talks are so inviting, and even sometimes include interesting, but incidental, minor facts: For example, she takes great delight in describing the origin of the wireless technology Bluetooth, as it refers back to 10th C. Danish King Harold Bluetooth, and the Bluetooth icon combines two runic letters!

Her greatest gift is her ability to present scholarly information to a general public and get them excited about our Nordic heritage.

In short, Loraine has single-handedly had a tremendous impact on the field of Runology, a realm that is so far-reaching and consequential to all of us who treasure our Scandinavian cultural heritage.

I would now like to present Loraine Jensen with the first Danish American Center Community Impact Award

2024

This year's Dane of the Year truly helps us put the "Danish" in "Danish American Center." She has cooked many delicious meals for us as a caterer for Holiday dinners but she is also a great volunteer. She helps with at least four Wednesday luncheons a year and her menus are always traditional Danish foods. It would not be Christmas without her Flæskesteg and Ris a la Mande. She has made fancy open-faced sandwiches for the sandwich auction at past Danish Days and open-faced sandwiches for Onsdag Frokost, Wednesday lunches. The underlying theme of much of her work is food.... Delicious and traditional Danish food. She started as a baker and with her husband ran Blackey's a renown bakery in NE Minneapolis for years. When she retired, she shared her recipes with Denny's Bakery in Bloomington so we can still buy Kringle and Danish rye bread.... staples at the Danish American Center. She is also a big part of the fall fundraising Cheese Sale making leverpostej, asier and mahjonger cookies. In an emergency she was only a phone call away, which she proved, when a caterer got sick in the middle of a wedding party, and she saved the day. There is more to this nominee than food, though. Her involvement with the community goes back to Festival of Nation Days where she worked many hours. She is also a prolific knitter and participates in the fall art fair every November selling hand knit children's sweaters. Two years ago, she knit a Danish pattern cozy for the Danish Holiday room at the American Swedish Institute giving the display a handcrafted design touch. Whenever asked, she steps up and creates food and handcrafts with her special Danish touch. Please join me in honoring the 2024 Dane of the Year, Svea Ernst.