

# Mary Bergin Travel Column

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## A THING OF BEAUTY: Mineral Point couple revives 177-year-old hotel

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Genuine beauty will save the world, a Mineral Point couple believes, and they are rescuing one of the nation’s oldest and still-operating commercial buildings to help prove that point.

The Walker House, built in 1836 as an end-of-the-line resting spot for train travelers and stagecoach riders, recently reopened with an additional purpose: The World Institute for Extreme Beauty.

The unusual stone structure carved into a hillside remains true to its original mission of providing food and lodging, but now it’s more than that.

Owners Dan and Kathy Vaillancourt, Mineral Point residents since 1975, are cutting into retirement savings to revive the neglected hotel, which had 23 busted water pipes and no heat when they took over.

### 'A powerful sense of place'

Dan is a tenured philosophy professor at Loyola University Chicago and former chairman of the humanities department. He was a Fulbright Scholar in the 1970s and has gained global recognition for his academic research in aesthetics and the study of beauty.

The professor routinely challenges students to engage in “what’s real” because “we are living in a world of artificiality.” Each of the nine Walker House guest rooms contains a journal for writing, but no television.

The stories people share “is why we do this,” Dan says. “Now we need to amplify what we’re doing. It encourages us to work harder.”

He talks of the mother of an autistic teen who made The Walker House her space of respite, and another guest who booked a stay shortly after a parent died.

“We pride ourselves in creating a powerful sense of place,” Dan says, by fostering an appreciation for “what’s in front of us.” Furniture, floors, towel racks and art frames are made from pine and black-walnut trees cut within 30 miles of Mineral Point. Artwork is plentiful and made by people in a similar vicinity.

### **'Interactive and experiential'**

Meals are made with locally produced ingredients, including harvests from The Walker House’s raised-bed gardens and fruit trees.

Although open for single-night stays, group gatherings and “community engagement to launch you onto the rest of your life” are priorities.

“What happens here must be interactive and experiential,” Kathy says, so structured conferences and seminars are not the point.

“This is a school with no teachers, no lectures and no homework,” her husband emphasizes. It only provides the steppingstones necessary for realigning life.

The Vaillancourts identify 17 such pivot points and offer prompts to help navigate them. Example: A sign encourages guests to describe a significant moment in life, or to press on a wall photo to hear the story that goes with it.

Knowing your life’s story “is significant in holding your life together,” Dan suggests. From there, it’s easier to define and alter toxic elements such as addiction, isolation, poor nutrition, lack of exercise and financial mismanagement.

“People have more complex problems than relating to others,” Dan believes, and The Walker House work will help him “implement what I’ve studied for 50 years.”

His lifelong research distinguishes “standard beauty” from “extreme beauty.” The first “freezes you and compares you to impossible ideals,” Dan explains. “We spend \$1 trillion a year, trying to improve” self-image, but misguided efforts result in anxiety, depression, migraine headaches, eating disorders.

Extreme beauty acknowledges “every human is flawed, broken” and “the goal is to find beauty in the brokenness.”

## **'School of well-being'**

The owners describe their Institute for Extreme Beauty as the first “totally interactive school of well-being.” It is no coincidence that the setting is the often-broken Walker House, which Dan says has bankrupt at least six owners since the 1960s.

“I think this is a sacred space,” he says, of the 3-acre property where minerals were mined long ago. “The love these people had for each stone” in the building, “to cut and haul them three stories – you can’t imagine it today.”

Inside the structure’s Cornish Pub are Badger holes, caves of bedrock where miners lived after lead ore was discovered in the 1820s. Now meals are served in these small caverns and the 50-seat dining room.

About 20 volunteers work with the Vaillancourts, bartering artwork and manual labor for food, lodging or something else of value.

“We’re on budget and ahead of schedule,” Dan says. “Our goal is to bring money here, not take from it, and become points of light.”

## **Learn more**

For more about The Walker House, 1 Water St., Mineral Point, go to [thewalkerhouse.org](http://thewalkerhouse.org). Room rates are \$79-99, which includes a hot breakfast and \$10 gift certificate for beverages or food at the Cornish Pub.

The structure accommodates groups for weddings, reunions and other events. “A few people have gathered their friends and come for a meal, guided tour of the house and lots of TLC,” says Kathy.

Walk-in traffic is welcome unless it interferes with a private event.

Next to the house is the 47-mile Cheese Country Trail for hiking, biking and snowmobiling. It links Monroe to Mineral Point.

## **Mineral Point**

Mineral Point is known for its art galleries and studios. Dec. 7 is the next Gallery Night, during which businesses extend hours and artists demonstrate their work.

Hundreds of luminaria brighten sidewalks, carolers add holiday music and treats include roasted chestnuts.

At The Walker House, a four-course dinner to honor high school art and music students precedes the opening of an exhibit of student works. Students sell the tickets, one-half of proceeds will establish a school art fund and art is sold without payment of a commission.

Also on Dec. 7, Shake Rag Alley Center for the Arts presents holiday craft workshops for children, visits with Santa and gingerbread house decorating from 10 a.m. to noon.

For more about Mineral Point, a community on the National Register of Historic Places: [mineralpoint.com](http://mineralpoint.com) or 888-764-6894.