

Show notes:

Here is a link to the original auction footage. Thank you to Jennifer Johnston for recording and uploading! <https://vimeo.com/129359799>

Check out all things New Hamburg Mennonite Relief Sale at [their website here](#), including a photo of the Renske's newest (and last) feature quilt.

[Here is link](#) to all the relief sales in Canada and US!

[Renske Helmuth's blog](#) has plenty of insight into her quilts, including a whole section on her relief sale quilts (this is not updated but still a rich resource).

EPISODE 16: RELIEF SALE

VO: Welcome to Season 3 of Undercurrents! We are doing something unusual here by starting things off with a bonus episode, in which we go back in time to investigate the sale of a quilt called, "Threads of Africa", that sold for an unbelievable price. But in order to do that, we have to first talk about relief sales.

My name is Ken Ogasawara and I'm part of the Community Engagement team at Mennonite Central Committee in Ontario. Undercurrents is one way to tell the rich stories coming from our community of partners, program participants, staff, and others. Undercurrents are brought to you by Kindred Credit Union. Kindred's purpose is cooperative banking that connects values and faith with finances inspiring peaceful, just, and prosperous communities. Embodying the spirit of mutual aid put into faithful practice, Kindred has been grateful to be a long time supporter of the New Hamburg Mennonite relief sale.

VO: The relief sale is a festive and magical place where Mennonites wrestle joyfully between their naturally frugal disposition, and the urge to indulge in the hedonistic pleasures of deep fried treats and the extravagant beauty of hand-made quilts. Every year more than two dozen relief sales across Turtle Island raise millions of dollars for MCC.

Relief Sale

VO: The relief sale I'm most familiar with is the New Hamburg Mennonite Relief Sale, a stone's throw from my hometown. The atmosphere is like a county fair - live music, bouncy castles and face-painting, and TONS of food. We're talking hearty fare like donuts, french fries, spring rolls. There are pies, tarts, and watermelon. There are various meats on buns. All of these food

vendors are in fact volunteers from churches across southern Ontario who put their own time, money, expertise, and equipment to full use to feed the hungry masses every year.

[montage of relief sale participants]

VO: *But if there is one draw that might eclipse the delicious food, it's the quilts.*

VO: *Every year, thousands of gorgeous quilts are designed, created, and donated to be sold at relief sale quilt auctions all across Canada and the US. They come in all shapes and sizes, from exquisite crib quilts, to billowing king-size bed covers. Every year at the New Hamburg sale, there is a feature quilt - a special piece that is, well, featured. They're always spectacular, top-notch in both artistry and craft. There is one woman who has made a queen-sized impact on the landscape of the feature quilt and the quilt auction as a whole, over the past two decades. Her name is Renske Helmuth.*

[clip of auctioneer]

Renske Helmuth

Renske: Last year I gave one of my own and my husband still just kind of, "You shouldn't have done that. You could have done another one. I liked that one. Well, then you should told me. I have so many.

VO: *Renske created her first feature quilt for the New Hamburg Mennonite Relief Sale in 1999 and since then has created 8 more feature quilts. Each of these unique quilts is a collaborative effort with dozens, sometimes up to a hundred quilters joining in to create the individual panels that are brought together under Renske's direction and sharp eye. She's also won awards at international quilting competitions and traveled widely teaching the fine art of quilting. But when it comes to making a quilt for the relief sale, Renske isn't thinking about awards or personal artistry. There is but one goal in mind.*

Renske: These quilts are made to make money for MCC. That's the main goal. When you start something for yourself, you do it different. This one is made to sell. You try and make something that people will like. You might not like it, but it's a different mindset. It's not for my taste.

VO: *Renske learned this lesson early on in her career with the relief sale*

Renske: Oh, I did two for the relief sale with the church and they were not bad. The one was a mariner compass and that sold really well. Then I made the blue one that I thought was really nice and it didn't do well. I was on my way home and you know the song Oh Lord, It's hard to be Humble? That came in my mind and I thought, "Uh-oh".

VO: *Renske's defining gift as a quilter has been to come up with a unique idea and to inspire others to join her in its creation. She understands that it's not just about the design - it's the story behind the quilt that people are fascinated by. This is why for the 2015 feature quilt, she traveled all the way to East Africa to source materials for the quilt that came to be called "Threads of Africa".*

Threads of Africa

Renske: I did, there was not much fabric in Kenya. We went to Tanzania and in Arusha I went to the market and I bought a lot of fabric because you can't buy small pieces. You buy six meters of each but you have to think that you have to take it home. So I only took and divided it up between different people and fabric is kind of heavy, so I had all this fabric. Then to come up with an idea, that took a while. I walk every day, so I walked and then the idea came.

VO: *Her idea was to piece together a collage of images inspired by what she had seen on her trip to East Africa. She took this idea to the Waterloo County Quilters Guild where Renske has been a member for over twenty years.*

Renske: I told the Guild members that I was making a quilt for the relief sale if they were interested.

VO: *This group of quilters along with quilters from her church, are Renske's regular collaborators on her relief sale quilts and she is quick to point out that none of her quilts would have been possible without their help.*

Renske: Well 30 some people were interested and they all came to our place for this Saturday, like in different groups. They could get ideas, look at books, they had to use fabric that I had. Then they went home, made the blocks, and then the big job was to put it all together.

VO: *Of the two hundred or so quilts made every year for the New Hamburg relief sale, many sell for a couple hundred dollars. Some, like a feature quilt might go for a few thousand. But occasionally, the stars align for the only kind of war that MCC condones: a bidding war.*

[auction audio]

The Auction

VO: *The quilt auction at the New Hamburg Mennonite Relief sale is, as I've said, a big draw. The action takes place in a former hockey arena. At the auction's peak mid-morning, there are probably close to 1000 people packed in there to watch the show. There is a stage set up near center ice. On this stage are a few clerks sitting at a table, keeping track of the quilts that have sold. There is a large rotating quilt display that the selling quilt is laid out on. Each quilt is carefully draped on this board and shown off, by two Mennonite women in conservative dress and white gloves. These women are cold-blooded professionals - I've never seen them so much*

as crack a smile or raise an eyebrow no matter how energized the bidding got. And last but not least, the master of ceremonies who presides over the whole show: the auctioneer.

Gary: I'm Mennonite myself, so right away, I think I was asked to be a part of it as a bid taker to begin with, and then as an auctioneer. But, I believe, I've been doing it there for 25 years or so.

VO: *This is Gary Jantzi. Professional auctioneer. As a boy growing up on a dairy farm, he would skip school to go to cattle auctions with his dad, enthralled by the speed and charisma of the auctioneers. After getting home from these auctions, young Gary would round up some cattle in the barn and auction them off to imaginary bidders. Gary was the one working the stage on Saturday May 30th, 2015 when that year's feature quilt, Threads of Africa by Renske Helmuth and the Waterloo County Quilting Guild, came up for sale.*

VO: *How do you know what number to start at because you're not starting every quilt with the same price base?*

Gary: No. That's a really good question. Typically, with this quilt auction, there is no real set price and it just depends on the people wanting it. But this one, in particular, I had an idea. It was a promotional quilt, I believe, and I had an idea it could go quite good.

VO: *Gary started the bidding off at 7,000 but wasn't getting any bites so he dropped it down to \$3,000 and that's where it started.*

[Auction audio]

Gary: So we'll just pause it here. This is a moment where I thought this quilt would only go for 10,000. So I stopped and talked a little bit about it, but this is in my head thinking maybe this is where it's going to end.

VO: *Calling out an auction when the bids are flying left and right is fun, but it's when the bidding stalls that an auctioneer really gets to work.*

[Auction audio]

Renske: Then got excited. You hope to get a certain amount.

Ken: What was your hope for, like what were you thinking like the amount?

Renske: It would be nice to get \$10,000. Then you can always hope for more, but it's an auction. I've been to enough auctions where things don't work out and something that should go way higher, didn't, and something that's not quite there, goes sky high. You have two people that want it bad. That's all you need, two that are interested.

Introduce Bruce

VO: *For many years, there were a few generous quilt enthusiasts who could be counted on to pay top dollar for quilts. One of these was the late Bruce Menary who passed away in 2016, just a year after this auction took place. He was the owner of Len's Mill Stores, a family-run fabric and textile business with locations all over south-western Ontario. Bruce and his family had become generous supporters of the relief sale and of the quilt auction in particular, buying dozens of quilts over the years which are proudly displayed in their stores. But as strong as Bruce Menary's support was, as Renske said, in an auction, it takes two to tango. So allow me to introduce to you.*

Introduce Emily

Emily: Emily Hunsberger. I've been making quilts for the relief sale since 1995. I think I was looking back to some pictures I had taken, so I was counting them up. I think 35 quilts, at least, that I've donated.

VO: *I knew this was a generous donation of time, energy, and materials but when I asked Emily how long it took to make a quilt.*

Emily: This is the question you don't ask a quilter. How long did it take and how much did it cost? Because you, well, some people do keep track of hours, but you know, that would be so depressing. Because when do you start? When you're shopping for the fabric, when you're washing the fabric, ironing the fabric, cutting the fabric. It just takes a long time. People are there to get a really nice quilt for next to nothing, less than the fabric costs sometimes. And people will say, "oh, well, think of the total. And it's all going to a good cause and stuff". But you still spent a few months, at least making that thing.

VO: *Emily was ready to put her money where her mouth was. She had worked with Renske on Threads of Africa and thought it was worthy of a good price and she was ready to spend her own money to make that happen.*

Emily: First I check my bank account [laughs] to make sure I wouldn't like get caught at the desk and say, "oh I'll call you on Monday" kind of thing. You know? And I'm also involved in Grandmothers to Grandmothers, which is a Steven Lewis foundation group of women who are helping grandmothers in Sub-Saharan Africa. So in the back of my mind, I thought "if I got the quilt, I would donate it to them". You know, just tried to play it cool.

VO: *It's at this point, after Gary has laboured at 10,000 and is wondering if this is where it will end, that Emily and Bruce go toe to toe.*

Gary : This is where I started thinking this is going to get exciting.

[Auction audio]

Gary : You can tell the bidding has slowed a little bit. It's getting into high numbers. So the two parties are now thinking. Slowing down and they're thinking, "Wow, this is a lot of money, but it's all going to good cause." That's another thing in their heads is all the money is going to a good cause.

[Auction audio]

Gary: At this time, my adrenaline is just running.

Emily: At this point he keeps looking at me. This is the purse I was carrying and I sort of went [laughs] small purse. I see Renske was sitting down there going, "what is Emily doing?"

Gary: Most people have a number set in their mind of where they're going to stop and it's somewhat my job to convince them to go over that number. I'm assuming they had a limit in their head of 35 or 36, or even less than that. And just the momentum, it went way over what they were thinking they were going to spend. And I'm wondering once it hit over 40, that was their limit.

VO: *I put this question to Emily.*

Ken: Can I ask you, what in your head, what limit did you sort of roughly have?

Emily: About 42. Yeah.

Ken: You really?

VO: Emily would need to bid \$43,000 to beat Bruce Menary's bid but, with the discipline and focus of an expert quilter, she kept her wits and stuck to her budget.

[Auction audio]

Gary:

I would say out of my almost 30 years in this career, that would be one of my definitely highlights. And part of it is an auction, is the buzz, the adrenaline running, the crowds cheering on and it's an awesome feeling for both the buyer and for myself and for everyone else. Everybody knows this money is totally being donated. So it's a win-win everywhere.

VO: *Bruce Menary ended up with the winning bid, buying "Threads of Africa" for 42,000. You would be excused for assuming that would be enough to put it in top spot in the history of MCC relief sale quilt auctions. But you would be wrong. In 2002, a quilt called "Kaleidoscope of Nations" sold for \$44,000. I'll give you one guess as to who made that quilt.*

Renske: *\$10,000 would be nice.*

Renske is philosophical about the success of her quilts. She didn't expect Kaleidoscope of Nations to sell for as much as it did and she certainly didn't expect lightning to strike twice.

Renske: "Oh, well, what now?" And I said, "Well, it never happens again."

Conclusion

VO: *But I daresay it could happen again because the 2022 feature quilt being auctioned off on Saturday May 28th is once again by Renske Helmuth and get this - it's her last one.*

Renske: For now I say this is it. Ok, this is it there's another one it will be bonus. But, it takes a lot of thinking, the thinking part is harder than the doing part

VO: *This last quilt has some similarities to Threads of Africa. Renske went on another MCC learning tour to collect fabric, this time to Nepal.*

Renske sat on this fabric, perhaps literally, for nearly 3 years before inspiration struck. The end result is a gorgeous work of art, with 16 panels depicting scenes of everyday life in Nepal: a woman with a bright smile carrying a basket on her head, a group of women hoeing in a field, a landscape with rice fields in the foreground and the majestic Himalayans in the background. Some of these images were inspired directly by photos that Renske had taken on her trip. The quilt is called Glimpses of Nepal, it is stunning, and a fitting conclusion to Renske's remarkable legacy.

[Montage of relief sale participants]

VO: *Picture this a family patiently hand-making spring rolls in a church basement; Renske piecing together individual quilt panels made by dozens of quilters; Emily with her heart racing bidding for a prized quilt; a family in Ukraine, receiving an MCC relief kit; what do all of these have in common? These scenarios create something greater than the sum of its parts.*

Perhaps this year, wherever you are, one small part you can do is to visit a relief sale near you! I've put a link to all the relief sales across Canada and the US in the show notes. And if you live in Ontario, do as Emily did - mark the date on your calendar, check your bank account, and get ready to bid!

Gratitude and Credits

VO: *I'd like to thank Renske Helmuth, Emily Hunsberger, and Gary Jantzi and the thousands of volunteers across Canada and the U.S. for your service at relief sales over the years. A special dept of gratitude to the quilters - thank you for every stitch, every hour, and every ounce of love you've poured into your art. Your contributions are priceless.*

*Huge thanks to Kindred Credit Union for sponsoring Undercurrents and the New Hamburg Mennonite relief sale. Also a big thank you to Len's Mill Stores who have continued their tradition of supporting the relief sale by sponsoring this year's quilt auction. Thanks to producer Christen Kong for her invaluable support in putting this episode together. This episode was mixed by Francois Goudreault, theme music by Brian MacMillan, and artwork by Jesse Bergen. And of course, thank **you** for listening and stay tuned for the next episode coming out in June. My name is Ken Ogasawara, have a great rest of your day.*