As the outside air creeps into the 90s for the first time this year issuing in summer, I sit in my somewhat uncomfortable house (as I don’t use air conditioning) contemplating what Galesburg has meant to me over the past eleven years.

Having spent all but four of my first twenty-nine years of life on east coast (between North Carolina and Rhode Island), it was with a bit of trepidation that I moved to this relatively small community that I previously had known next to nothing about. For once, ignorance was bliss and I accepted reassurances from Knox colleagues that Galesburg was a wonderful place to live. Nearly a dozen years later and I definitely feel I made the right choice.

What is it that makes Galesburg such a great place to live? First and foremost to me, there is a sense of calmness and peacefulness here. Having lived in much busier places, there is something very reassuring about the serenity in the city.

This is a particularly welcome characteristic in a culture whose lives seem to get busier by the day, and where we spend much less time in our vehicles than people in other places (largely because of the lack of traffic and the close proximity of essential businesses and services), we have more time to just relax. It shows.

Second, it is relatively easy to walk or bike places here. Living almost exactly one mile from my office, it is extremely convenient and very enjoyable to walk or bike when the weather permits, which outside of the winter is most of the time. Slowing one’s mode of transportation during one’s commute to work has many benefits. Not only does one get physical exercise, but one sees much more of their neighborhood. This latter feature has imbued in me a deeper connection with Galesburg. Slowing down also provides me more time to think about things. Given how busy my day typically is, having a few extra minutes to think uninterrupted by phone calls or office visits has been invaluable. Additionally, the environmental benefits of walking or biking (rather than driving) are huge—e.g., virtually no greenhouse gas emissions, less need for parking lots, reduced wear and tear on existing roads.

Third, Galesburg is small enough that almost all people and places are accessible. City council meetings provide an opportunity for residents to speak and be heard during the biweekly events (and on television, as well). Most businesses appear to be locally owned and operated. This allows consumers to have more say and for owners to be more responsive to individual needs. Also, the size of the community allows people to be well-known and connected but still maintain a sufficient level of anonymity and privacy.

Fourth, Galesburg isn’t too far from major centers of human activity. A three hour train ride gets one to the heart of Chicago. One hour of driving north or south takes one to active urban areas as well; two hours either way gets one to major universities (i.e., University of Illinois and the University of Iowa). Also, there are many wonderful communities, parks, and museums within the region that have a lot to offer visitors, namely, Bishop Hill, Navoo, Dickson Mounds (in Lewistown), Galena, Apple River Canyon State Park (near Galena), Quad City Botanical Center (in Rock Island), and the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library (in Springfield). Galesburg affords residents the luxury of living in a peaceful area while still having access to the excitement associated with a metropolis or major cultural facility.

But one need not leave Galesburg for some excitement. We have many treasures right here that are worthy of mention. The Landmark’s roasted garlic and peasant bread is to die for as is Cornucopia’s one world salad. Discovery Depot houses almost everything meaningful for children to explore and learn. And Lake Storey provides outdoor relaxation as well.

Lastly, Galesburg benefits from the lack of a major energy polluter or hazard—such as a coal burning plant or nuclear facility. And while there still exist several major polluters located within the city limits (a topic for a future article), Galesburg’s air quality is likely much better than larger urban centers in Illinois.

All the above being said, Galesburg is not without challenges—too many empty downtown properties, too many jobless people to employ, too many high school dropouts, and way too many train whistles. These provide citizens, like you and me, with opportunities for improvement. I believe that the people of Galesburg will rise to the occasion and work to improve in these areas, for their benefit as well as their city’s.

As I wipe a mid-afternoon sweat off my brow, I can look forward to a restful and rewarding summer in the “small city” I now call home. Thank you.

Growing as art

by Gayle Keiser

If you see a crop growing on a truck flatbed parked in the 200 block of S. Kellogg Street, your first guess probably won’t be that it’s the work of an artist. Or if you come across greens popping up in an empty lot on the sidewalk next to The Box (warehouse in the rear of the former Wing Manufacturing building at Simons and Kellogg streets), you might not expect to find those same greens mounted on the wall. Take a look inside The Box!

Jeff Schmuki sees his work both as art and agriculture. “Can’t both be the same?” Jeff asked in a recent interview in his studio at The Box. Pointing out that art consistently defies definition, he saw art as “something that Garden of Eden, growing my own vegetables and rare flowers. Birds and animals came along, and it was a kind of a refuge for nature. I’m recreating what I miss.”

Jeff cites scientific evidence that clearly demonstrates change in the environment. He believes this change is leading to disruptive weather patterns, water shortages, and temperature change that make growing seasons less productive.

He concludes, “We don’t know exactly where we’re headed, but we do know that weather is changing and it’s not going to benefit us.”

Since beginning his projects as a Studios Midwest artist in Galesburg on June 21st, Jeff has been growing green building blocks from mortar made in his studio. You might surprise yourself and produce too much fresh food.”

Sustaining the environment is another benefit of his approach to food production. “Knowing where that food comes from is very important, knowing what’s in it and what’s not in it. You don’t have to use pesticides. You can use several other methods of infecting insects. You don’t have to poison the ground in which you plant,” Jeff says. He’s in research mode with respect to the GMO (genetically modified organism) issue. He is interested in talking to farmers about the costs and benefits of using this technology. He boils the key questions down to a “why.” “I don’t think you can turn back.”

In addition, the Galesburg Civic Art Center web site will host an on-line show, “Studios Midwest Art.” A significant amount of the work by former Studios Midwest artists will be up for view from July 31st and run through the rest of the year.