

THE SMALL MIRACLES OF *Everyday Life*

It is the beginning of the harvest season and only the retired farmers show up on time. They tromp into the Kalonial Townhouse Restaurant, greeting each other with the playful jibes and taunts that are the currency of affection among small town men of their generation.

"Your hair supposed to look like that?"

"Like what? Must be your eyes, Ted. Better get 'em checked."

They come into the place one by one, just as they used to enter the fields. But here they find community, not isolation. This is a meeting of the Kalona Koffee Klub, a loose-knit group that began back in 1969.

You might think that Richard Horwitz, seated at a table with a steaming coffee mug, is just another farmer—and you wouldn't be far from wrong. Horwitz *has* worked for twenty years as a hired hand on a nearby hog farm. He lives in Liberty Township, three dusty miles from the closest paved road. But he is also a professor of

American Studies at the UI, and it's not just the coffee and the atmosphere that he's soaking up on this brilliant fall day—he's also observing the interactions of the rural residents who gather here, part of his research on small town coffee clubs.

Some researchers are drawn to the extraordinary. Horwitz is more interested in the mundane patterns of life, the everyday miracles that are all too frequently overlooked because they occur to "regular" people as they go about the business of living.

Back in his Iowa City office, the professor

with the calloused hands and the Abe Lincoln beard explains his passion quite simply.

"I do research and teaching about the place where I live—it's right outside," he says, jabbing a thumb toward the window. "Why not study *that*? It just makes sense."

His research led Horwitz to act as a consultant to the Smithsonian Institution and the Iowa Department of Cultural Affairs. One of the many results of this collaboration was the very first curriculum guide for teaching about Iowa culture in the public schools: "Iowa Folklife: Our People, Communities, and Traditions."

"I was afraid that the guide might just gather dust on some shelf," Horwitz admits. "But teachers are actually using them throughout the state. This research is helping them to do their jobs better, and that's what it's all about."

Far too many Iowans see "culture" as something that happens somewhere else. But when teachers use the new curriculum guide, students often have a profound change of attitude, according to Horwitz.

"Kids learn to think differently about their family and about their



Richard Horwitz, Professor of American Studies

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places," he observes. "You'll hear them ask, 'You mean my Aunt Jenny's quilts are a form of *culture*?' Or 'Are you saying that because Uncle Tad can speak Czech, he's part of an ethnic *tradition*?'"

Seated beneath a calendar bearing a picture of the Mexican revolutionary Emiliano

Zapata, a give-away from "La Mexicana" store and restaurant in nearby West Liberty, Horwitz smiles and adds, "I love it when I see the little light bulbs going on over their heads."