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Deanna Rowe says restoration of Homestead House B&B in downtown Willoughby was a lot of hard work, but she and her husband, Fred, won a statewide award from Heritage Ohio for their efforts.

Statewide honor served up to Homestead House Bed & Breakfast

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■ “Best Residential Rehabilitation Improvement” award given to downtown Willoughby establishment

Deanna Rowe thought keeping a bed and breakfast inn would be a lot more work than it actually turned out to be.

“I thought it would be harder than it is,” she said. “Bed and breakfast people are so extremely nice.”

She and her husband, Fred, opened the Homestead House Bed & Breakfast in downtown Willoughby in August 2006. Although the Rowes had no construction experience, they worked for more than two years along with restoration architects to restore the 5,500-square-foot house.

The house built in 1884 on West Spaulding Street had past lives as a church, a boarding house for railroad employees, a speakeasy and the original Willoughby School of Fine Arts. It had been vacant for 30 years when they began the work to rehabilitate it.

“It was in terrible shape,” Rowe said.

Now, Heritage Ohio, a partner of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, has honored the Rowes with its statewide “Best Residential Rehabilitation Improvement” award for their efforts.

The plaque they got has a place of honor at the foot of the staircase.

“Ohioans are concerned about the future of their heritage,” said W. Kevin Pape, board chairman of Heritage Ohio.

“The inspiration these award winners provide will pay dividends far into the future.”

The staircase and floors at Homestead House are originals dating back to 1884.

Although innkeeping has been easier than she expected, the restoration work was harder and the expense was greater.

“We had to do a lot of it ourselves or we could never have afforded it,” she said.

Fred Rowe, who works for Active Plumbing, discovered he had a real talent for painting. He applied more than 100 gallons of paint himself.

And Deanna discovered a talent for wood-carving.

Of the 29 windows on the house, only one was an original window. So Deanna made a template of the header scrollwork and manually carved 28 replicas.

“I used a carving tool,” she said. “And I must say the last one went faster than the first.”

The expense of bringing the structure in compliance with building codes so they could open for guests was a surprise.

“Things like a sprinkler system are pretty costly,” she said. “We spent a lot more than we anticipated.”

When the Rowes learned that the building’s original dirt-floor basement was not up to code, they dug it out by hand to make the ceiling higher.

The Rowes and their friends hauled the dirt out in 5-gallon pails, using it to build up the flower beds around the house.

“It was dry dirt with a lot of coal dust mixed in,” she said. “The house once was heated by a coal furnace.”

Since it opened a little more than a year ago, the Homestead House Bed & Break-

fast has become a solid part of downtown Willoughby.

“We’ve had many repeat guests,” Deanna said. “Some come once a month. A lot of them like being a part of a small town they can walk around in.”

This summer found folks gathering on the inn’s porch with their glasses of wine to take in concerts set in the downtown gazebo.

The house has five suites, a few with fireplaces and whirlpool tubs for two. They’re on the second floor and all are named for eras in the home’s history and furnished consistent with each theme.

Guests, who typically find Homestead House on the Web, have come from as far as Australia and many European countries. There is no real B&B demographic, Deanna Rowe said, except that guests share a love of old houses and meeting other people.

“We get bikers and bicyclists, people in town for weddings and funerals, and those who want to be here for Christmas or New Year’s,” she said.

Some folks book for a week or more so they can sample the wide array of dining options in downtown Willoughby.

Deanna, who loves to cook, serves a three-course gourmet breakfast to her guests.

“My Finnish pancakes have become a favorite,” she said.

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