

Part 3: A Pillar of the Community

Dick Dasen was a successful entrepreneur and investor, an observant Christian, and a generous supporter of local charities. The story of his secret life seemed too extreme to be true.

by Hal Herring

The police documents describing the many months of investigation leading up to Dick Dasen's arrest can be read as a chronicle of human weakness and fallibility. But the weakness described there is not Dasen's; on the contrary, one marvels at the level of organization and pure intelligence it must have taken to run successful businesses, engage in charitable works, support a household and still maintain relationships with so many different people, so many of whom were portraits of chemically-induced disorders and bad judgment on a fantastic scale. The voices of the police informants cited in the documents rise to a kind of cacophony by the late winter of 2004; it seems that half the people arrested in Kalispell that fall and winter had something to say about Dick Dasen.

And he might have been the most unlikely person in the whole Flathead Valley to be the topic of conversations like those.



Richard A. "Dick" Dasen

Richard Arnold "Dick" Dasen came to Kalispell from Michigan in 1968, part of a small wave of Michiganders who held good jobs with the big automakers but whose lives were forever changed by the bloody Detroit race riots of 1967. This wave left home in search of a safer and healthier place to raise their families, and many of them found it along the rivers and in the mountains of western Montana. Dasen brought with him his young and growing family, an engineering degree from the University of Michigan, and that classic combo for success in the American West: boundless energy and a natural gambler's assessment of risks.

After a short stint as an instructor at Flathead Community College, he and a fellow University of Michigan alumni teamed up to buy City Service, a wholesale fuel distributorship. In 1972, when he was forty years old, Dasen partnered with an established local entrepreneur to build the Outlaw Inn and convention center, which he later sold for a hefty profit, and which is still a serious engine of the Flathead Valley economy.

The business ventures that followed were shrewd exercises in synergy. The expansion of City Services required real estate for gas stations and convenience stores, so Dasen formed Northwest

Investments Partnerships to buy it. He created Arrowhead Construction to build the buildings, and soon became a major builder of other large-scale commercial projects around the valley. He made forays into banking, among them the creation of Budget Finance, a company that offered loans to low-income borrowers. As the Flathead boomed in the late 1980s and early 90s, real estate became the dominant part of Dasen's business. Northwest Investments became Peak Development in the '90s, building office parks like Ashley Square and the Southfield Tower. Through Budget Finance, Dasen owned almost a quarter of the Big Mountain ski resort at one point, and he sat on the boards of prominent local companies including Semitool.



The Blue and White Motel

And all that time, Dasen cultivated an impressive resume of good works, serving on the boards of the local hospital, the Immanuel Lutheran Home, and a Christian school. He served as head of the Chamber of Commerce, and was given the Chamber's highest honor, the Great Chief Award, in 1999. He created a foundation called the Education Recovery Center, to help troubled teens finish high school. And then there was Christian Credit Counseling, where he volunteered his time and expertise to help people with money problems, managing debt, obtaining loans, teaching them the basics of an art that he had long ago mastered: pulling yourself up by your bootstraps.

The prostitution sting was conducted in late February of 2004, in rooms 402 and 403 of the Blue and White Motel.

A young woman named Holli Rose agreed to set it up, and Room 402 was wired for sound and video. According to police, in that room, Rose and Dasen discussed the \$2,500 she needed for a bail bondsman and her worries that she had not been able to make the payments on her truck to Budget Finance. Dasen assured her that he would take care of the problems, and the two undressed. Police entered the room shortly thereafter and arrested Dasen, who was wearing his underwear and socks.

The news of Dasen's arrest was initially greeted with disgust by many in the local business community. It looked like a case of a straight-laced, small-town police department targeting one of the region's most popular and dynamic businessmen, wrecking a good man's life for a moment of weakness and a victimless crime. Kalispell Police Chief Frank Garner asked the community to please be patient. The investigation had been going on for more than a year. There was, Garner assured them, much more to the story.



Dasen's house on the market

The police soon revealed a lurid tale of alleged sex-for-pay relationships with dozens of girls and women, many of whom claimed to have been trapped into participation by debts to his finance company, or lured by payments so large they were impossible to resist. There were accounts of underage girls, lesbian scenes, videotapes, sex toys, young women flying in from California for liaisons, others traveling from Great Falls, or little prairie hamlets like Choteau, and returning flush with cash and loaded with drugs. Informants included an outraged grandmother,

jealous boyfriends, suspicious mothers and the girls themselves, arrested, or simply furious at being "cut-off" from payments. Lists of items seized in police searches at Dasen's businesses showed an odd integration of business and pleasure, with sexual aids and nude photographs sharing space with financial records and bills.

And even though it turned out that methamphetamine was at the heart of the story, nowhere is there any allegation that Dasen himself ever used drugs, or that he ever had a problem with alcohol. He conducted most of his alleged business with the women during the daytime.

For Dasen's fellow members at Kalispell's Trinity Lutheran Church, where he served as an elder and board member for more than a decade, the news of his arrest was a bolt from the blue. Ed Croymans, vice president of Trinity Lutheran and a friend and business associate of Dasen's for over twenty years, was away on business when he called home one night. "My wife said 'You'll never believe what is on the news,' Croymans said. "Dick had been arrested, but that just didn't register with me. I was bewildered by it, shocked. This is a man who's blessed with a natural mind and talent for business, and who's used it to help so many people in this community, in so many ways, without charge. People who were about to lose their homes, their businesses. He has a sense of his purpose in God's calling in his life, and he's followed it, he's served his fellow man." Croymans paused. "My wife's first husband was an alcohol and gambling addict, and left her high and dry with two small children. She went to Dick, and he helped her get a loan that she would never have been able to get on her own. She got a car with it, and got back on her feet. She still has a study Bible that he gave to her, and she still feels that he is a great man. He never asked her for any sexual favors, and you can find a lot of people who can tell you the same story."

Many charitable organizations in the valley referred their clients to Dasen and his staff. Sherry Stevenswolf at Kalispell's United Way said that over the course of fifteen years she had referred hundreds of people to him. "Unless they were uncomfortable with the Christian aspect, we always sent them there for help. He was the payee for so many people in this community who were physically or mentally incapable of handling their own finances."

Dasen closed Christian Credit a couple of years before his arrest, calling Stevenswolf to ask her not to send any more clients to him. "We were grateful for all the years he'd helped us," she said. "In all that time, we never heard anything but good from the people we sent to him." But, Stevenswolf said, since Dasen's arrest, she has heard a different story. "None of us in social services ever suspected anything, but our clients, people on the street, have told me that it was common knowledge that there was a problem."

Indeed, in that other world, there were lots of problems.