

Ring of Cheer

The Bill Bagwell Handbell Choir of Washington chimes in with the heart and harmony of the season.

by Bryan A. Oesterreich

The setting is the centuries-old Orleans Cathedral, near Paris, France. It's time for the Loire Valley Handbell Festival. Hundreds of people have quietly filed in and taken seats. Frescoes adorn the ceilings; stained glass windows color the flood of light. A handbell choir is positioned just below the altar. Each member is wearing black slacks, a starched white shirt, and white gloves. The conductor raises her baton, and the audience grows silent. Then, the brass bells begin to ring.

What makes this performance different from the thousands of others held at this cathedral is that the Bill Bagwell Handbell Choir traveled from Washington in Beaufort County across the Atlantic to ring their bells in joyful memory of one of their own.

The choir's story actually goes back to 1989 and to the man named Bill Bagwell. After graduation from Oral Roberts University in Tulsa, Oklahoma, Bagwell returned to North Carolina and worked as a chaplain, always sharing his compassion for others. "Bill was always the family mediator," says his mother, Hannah. "He always found a way to set things right."

In July 1989, at the age of 33, Bagwell died after a short struggle with a cancerous brain tumor. The following year, his parents, Hannah and James Bagwell, and family friend Grover Boyd, who had started a handbell choir in his Sunday school class at First Christian Church, decided a choir bearing his name would continue his life's legacy of giving joy.

Bell ringers

Long associated with the First Christian Church in Washington, the Bagwells approached the church congregation with a plan: If the church would raise some of the necessary funds, the Bagwells would set up a music endowment fund to ensure the future of the choir for many years. The money was raised, and the work began.

Bells were purchased, sheet music was obtained, auditions for bell ringers were scheduled, and a director was found — Sally Love, music director at First Christian Church.

The choir is made up of members of both the church and the community and includes members ranging in age from 20 to 80 years old. Their level of experience also varies. Bell ringing is an accessible form of music, even to novices who can't read music. "If they have some rhythm and an ear for notes, they can ring bells," says Love. In fact, many of the members of the Bill Bagwell Handbell Choir had no previous musical instrument experience. Take Bill Worsley, for example.

Although Worsley has been ringing handbells for more than nine years, he admits coming to the choir without any real instrumental experience. "I took up music in the 3rd and 4th

grades,” he says. “I taught myself harmonica but nothing more than that.” That didn’t stop him from trying handbells, and he says he gets as much out of performing as the audience gets from listening. “I think they can tell how much we enjoy it. It’s as if we’re all one instrument.”

Worsley’s enthusiasm for the choir sparked the interest of another family member — his daughter, Carolyn Stroud. Communications director for the City of Washington, Stroud has been a member of the choir for eight years; she also grew up with Bill Bagwell. “The bell choir carries on his work,” she says. “We try to bring some joy into people’s lives.” Stroud had taken piano and guitar lessons when she was younger and had always enjoyed the feeling of making music. While she enjoyed her earlier musical exposure, the handbells have allowed her to reach some unexpected high notes. “Our bell choir has given me a whole new perspective on the role of music in worship,” she says. “When we performed in France in front of all those diverse cultures, and different political perspectives, it was remarkable. The audience connected with our music — regardless of their affiliations.”

Stroud recalls another performance during the trip to Paris, this time in the American Church in Paris. “The audience there looked like the United Nations,” she says. “Many Americans work in Paris and come from all sorts of backgrounds. But they welcomed us equally.”

Pastor Michael Price at the First Christian Church has nothing but praise for the handbell ringers. “The bell choir adds another dimension to the worship experience for us,” he says. “The Bagwell family’s gift of love has spread musical joy throughout our community and [now] to the people of France.”

Christmas bells

The Bagwell Music Endowment Fund of First Christian Church in Washington provides support for the choir to attend bell ringing conferences and performances both in state and out of the country. Plans are being drawn up for a 2005 performance in Luxembourg.

Closer to home, the choir performs in downtown Washington every Christmas season at the site of the former train depot — now the Washington Civic Center. Its performance includes several handbell-only selections, as well as accompaniment for the Beaufort County Choral Society.

Joey Toler, program director for the Beaufort County Arts Council, has been enjoying the choir since its inception. “The Bill Bagwell Handbell Choir’s performances enhance our annual Christmas programs in a very special way,” he says. “Their stand-alone selections are magical, and when they accompany our choral society, people say they feel like they’re completely immersed in Christmas.”

Jonathan Clayborne, news editor and arts reporter for the Washington Daily News, has also followed the choir from the beginning. He thinks the choir reinforces the sense of community felt by citizens of Washington. “By staying in tune with each other, choir

members stay in tune with the community. So, in a way, the choir is an extension of Washington — its sounds and its people.”

Bill Bagwell’s sister, Jane Griffin, still lives in Washington and is very pleased with the results of her parents’ decision to remember her brother with the choir. “Every time I hear the bells ring, I think of Bill,” she says. “They help keep who Bill really was alive in our thoughts.”

Bryan A. Oesterreich will enjoy Christmas in Washington with his wife, Christine, and his daughter, Macie.

The Advent of Handbells

Handbells have been spreading joy since the early 1700s. In England, church tower bell ringers found the hand-sized bells much easier to practice with than the full-sized tower versions (and the smaller sound helped keep the peace in the neighborhood late at night). While the bells were popular for centuries in England, they took some time to catch on in the United States.

According to the American Guild of English Handbell Ringers (AGEHR), Margaret Shurcliff, of Boston, Massachusetts, gets credit for bringing the bells stateside. Shurcliff loved the bells’ delicate sounds so much that, in the early 1900s, she imported a set and got her family and friends together to form a choir. Word quickly spread. In 1937, Shurcliff and a few other enthusiasts formed the New England Guild of English Handbell Ringers. In the years that followed, the ringers would get together, exchange ideas on techniques, have dinner, and hold a public performance.

As interest spread, and more handbell choirs were formed across the continent, Shurcliff and her friends formed the AGEHR in 1954. Today, the guild has more than 9,000 members in 36 states and six foreign countries.

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