

Music Made in Heaven

Raleigh, North Carolina, handbell ensemble rings some very special bells in memory of some very special people



Above: Members of Music Made in Heaven read the inscriptions and toll the bells at the first Gathering, an annual, private event for the parent donors and their families.

Facing page: A very significant event takes place as MMIH members unpack the bells for the first time and finding their children's bells.

Ask a dozen or so handbell ringers why they ring, and you're likely to get a dozen or so answers—anything from the unique qualities of the instrument, to a favor owed to the director, to the sheer joy of making music. But ask the ten ringers in one Raleigh, North Carolina, handbell group, and you will get one common response: to honor the memory of their sons and daughters. These ten ringers belong to a handbell choir appropriately named Music Made in Heaven. Every ringer in the group has lost a child, and they, along with other parents who have lost children, have donated each of the bells in the three-octave set.

Elizabeth Barnes created Music Made in Heaven as a project in Landmark Education's Self-Expression and Leadership Program. Her project's goal was to create a new expression of some aspect of her life that also touched others in her community. Elizabeth said, "I went through several iterations, all involving handbells, before I determined the direction in which I wanted to go." Her primary inspiration was the death of her daughter, Janet, some 16 years earlier and her desire to remember Janet publicly.

by J.R. Smith

Elizabeth said, "I was saddened that our society is uncomfortable with conversations about children who have died. The simple and clear voice of handbells came to mind as a beautiful means for these children to speak to us again." With her mission in mind, she developed the concept and set out to find people who would help make it a reality. The first person she contacted was the mother of a close friend who had died. "I explained my idea to her and asked if she would be willing to donate a bell. And without hesitation, she said, 'Absolutely!'"

That, she said, gave her the courage to talk to the next person and the next. She added, "The surprise was that people did not turn me down, but rather expressed enthusiasm about rekindling the memory of their children in this unique manner."

Leap of Faith

Having gotten a good start on her project with a few committed donors, Elizabeth began shopping for bells. After deciding on the bells she wished to use, she discovered the manufacturer had a planned price increase. To get the bells before the price increase, she said, would require a tremendous leap of faith.

She said, "The price increase was going into effect July 1, and it was 4:30 p.m. on June 30. I had 30 minutes until the deadline. The choice came down to whether I was committed to this possibility or not. I picked up the phone at quarter to five and said, 'Send me the bells.'"

Finding Ringers

Elizabeth found that the most challenging part of the venture proved to be the recruitment of ringers rather than the fund raising. She said that finding ringers needed to be based not so much on their musical talent and ability, but more on where they were in the bereavement process. She explained that in providing a ministry to grieving parents, it is important that the ringers have progressed beyond the devastation, shell-shock, and utter despair of early grief. She said, "Some people get stuck in anger and bitterness over their loss and this group's message is certainly for them, as a ministry to them, but it's not where people in the group are."

She continued, "Because of our statement of intent, that we believe in a loving and compassionate God and we're playing out of joy and gratitude for the lives of these children, I was looking for those who had a seasoned grief, developed over time, rather than for those who were newly bereaved."

Having found her initial ringers, Elizabeth's next task was

to find a director. She had originally hoped to find someone who shared the same loss as the others, but was willing to forego that in order to find a capable leader. She said that she was fortunate to find Sue Crocker, the daughter-in-law of the organization's first donor. "Being the sister-in-law of one of the deceased children," she explained, "Sue had a tie and special insight into the dynamic of the group."

Sue did not have to think twice about taking on the job.

She said, "I could tell I wanted to do it the minute Elizabeth told me about it. You know when something is right for you, you feel an energy about it and I feel that."

Rehearsal and First Performance

Although the group had not yet received its new bells, the ensemble of seven began rehearsing with bells borrowed from Elizabeth's church. She said, "After we had been practicing a couple of months, our bells arrived. That was a big night as we unpacked them and played them for the very first time."

Each handle had a memorial inscription for a child or children. One of the ringers, Barbara Erickson, described the night the bells arrived and their first reading of the inscriptions. She

said, "I remember we were all looking for our bells, wondering who would be ringing my child's bell."

The ensemble's first performance was a private gathering of all the parents who had donated bells. The inscription on each bell was read, followed by the ringing of that child's bell. Since then, that performance has become an annual event known as The Gathering, and it continues to be a private event for the parents and their families.

Selecting Music

Just as the purchasing of the bells and the recruiting of ringers for such an ensemble has its unique set of criteria, so does the selection of music. Elizabeth said that one of the goals of the group is to bring joy and encouragement and that the music reflects that goal. Among the group's favorite pieces are Kevin McChesney's "Make Me an Instrument of Thy Peace" written in memory of the students who died at Columbine High School.

Ministry and Support

What originally started as a project for a self-expression class has in a few short years become an important ministry and means of support for the ringers, the donors, and audiences.



Ringer Colleen Lee said, "It's a therapy to others and a ministry to others, but mostly, I would have to say, it's a therapy for us." She explained that even though a child dies, being the parent of that child continues. She said, "You do things for your other children as they grow up, wondering what it would be like if Matthew (her son) were here and he were going to his first prom or he were getting married. So this is something you can do for that child when there are no other outlets."

Another ringer, Billie Freeman, says that she also does this as a gift to her child's brother. "There was no question that I would participate by giving a bell; however, I had no inclination to ring, even though I had rung before. I have one remaining son, and it was his idea that I would do this in memory of his brother. That was his way of having something tangible, even 17 years later."

Billie added that not only is the remembering of and connecting with her child beneficial to her own well being, but so is the fact that she is helping to bring comfort to others who have experienced the same loss. She said, "I believe it is important that we minister to others and show how God has been faithful. Even though this is a tragedy, the Lord brings good out of it that we can share with others. It is important that this experience is a testimony to God's grace in my life. Personally, this is what I want to share with someone else."

Even the rehearsals themselves are uplifting. Director Sue Crocker said, "I am always amazed at their strength and their power and their courage – always. I can come in from a bad day and leave feeling ten times better than when I came in. We laugh a lot, too, which is so important."

Elizabeth said that everywhere the group rings they are approached afterward by those who want to tell why the performance was meaningful to them. She said, "Someone will say, 'I just got news that my child has cancer,' or 'I lost my child just six months ago.' They know we understand their journey."

One of the most important missions of Music Made in Heaven, according to Elizabeth, is to offer hope. She said, "In the first few months after losing a child, you think you cannot survive the loss. We are inspired by the possibility that we can light a flame of hope to let others know they can survive with grace and hope and gratitude." She added, "After my daughter died, I wished I could be the last person ever to lose a child because it is so horrible. I would never wish for anyone else to go through it, but as we know, it happens far too frequently. It is very rewarding to be able to offer the hope to others that they, too, can find unexpected joy and gratitude in the remembrance of their children."

The Music Made in Heaven ringers include, Billie Freeman, Colleen Lee, Sabrina Tyndall, Esther Parker, Anna Skirvin, Elizabeth Barnes, Bonnie Woodruff, Barbara Erickson, Les McSpadden, and Dave Douglas. To learn more about the group, visit their web site at www.musicmadeinheaven.org. 

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The Inscriptions on Music Made in Heaven's Handbells

Jeorg Morris Ashcraft
February 1953-September 1954
In loving memory

Our first son: Gift for a day
February 20, 1965
Charles and Peggy Barham

Janet Logan Barnes
"Certain of a light
And strong with love"

In memory of
Janet Faith Briggs
Our joy for a brief time

For Bryan: Ray of Sunshine

Bethany Rush Cartledge
March 9, 1986-Jan. 18, 1994
"Of such is the kingdom"

Donna Lynn Crocker Toms
"A Light in the Darkness"
Mother

In loving memory of Jasmine

In Loving Memory of
Macy Wray Erickson
April 26, 1983-March 3, 2000

D. Gordon Freeman, Jr.
"To God Be the Glory 1970-1989"
Duff & Billie, Taylor & Anna

Bells Ring While Angels Sing
Robert Tomlinson Hill
April 13 1975 – August 8, 1990

Kristin Suzanne Jones
Trust in the Lord...
March 5, 1974-April 27, 2000

"Susie Bear" Jones
Feb. 10, 1985-Jan. 13, 1988
Ringling & singing in heaven!

Where words fail music speaks.
MATTHEW WILLIAM LEE
3/5/79 – 11/26/84

In Memory of Our Sons
Nicholas Joseph Miracola and
Paul Michael Spampinato

In Loving Memory
Leanne Mary Parker
Jan. 12, 1988-Jan. 18, 1988

Baby Piepho
March 2004
Psalms 139:16

In loving memory of
Martha Robertson Powell
Nov. 10, 1953-May 8, 2003

Amanda Quick – "Tuesday's child
is full of grace."
October 13, 1987

In Loving Memory
Of
Annie Shea Eaton

Baby John Parker Shell
1955
Son of Frances & Howard Shell

In loving memory of
Mark Edward Simpson 1955-1972
He loved music and laughter

Our Precious Angels
Preston Ray Skirvin 1994
Lacy Sheppard Skirvin 1996

In Loving Memory
Charles Harrison Smith, III
July 24, 1971-July 1, 1999

Andrew Achelles Stratas
Aug. 24, 1961-May 5, 1990
The Greatest of These is Love

Kathryn Elaine Waters
April 3, 1974
Louisville, KY.

In loving memory of
MARK ADAM TUCKER
July 23, 1971-May 24, 1999

Baby Sarah Abigail, 01/24/02
David & Sabrina Tyndall
Little ones to Him belong

Loving Memory Larry E. Stafford
Son of Rachel and Alvah Ward
Born Jan 1952-Died Nov 14, 1987

We remember Ben Woodruff
With the ringing of this bell.
He is making music in heaven.