



Picture Caption

A New Tradition of Giving

How one handbell festival organization is making it through tough economic times through giving

***T**hanks to a new tradition of raising money for causes other than their own, members of the Hudson Valley Handbell Festival/Conference, of New York, recently delivered three octaves of handchimes to White Lotus, a non-profit organization in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, whose mission is to offer hope and education to young women who have been or who are at risk of exploitation.*

The trip to Cambodia was put in motion after one of the Hudson Valley Festival directors, Eileen Laurence, saw a video of the young Cambodian girls from White Lotus performing a traditional dance together. Their movements, which she describes as “delicate and graceful,” led her to imagine those same girls playing handchimes. She said, “Having this musical instrument will surely help them create beautiful musical sounds by playing in community, while also nurturing a sense of individual uniqueness and value. Their self esteem will blossom and soar, like a lotus bloom.”

The purchase of the chimes was made possible by the Hudson Valley Handbell Festival Conference, held annually in the Hudson Valley Region of New York State. Besides being an event to bring local and visiting ringers together in a performance setting, the HVHFC in recent years has also charged itself with the task of raising money to provide assistance to other groups in serious need.

A New Tradition

In the fall of 2005, the leadership of the HVHFC met to discuss the fact that they were suffering financially and did not have enough money in their bank account to support that year’s upcoming festival. While many organizations in similar situations cut funding of other organizations as a way of saving money, the people responsible for this particular event tackled the problem from a completely opposite direction.

Courageous actions were taken to resuscitate the event, which, for the past 35 years, has attracted between 15 and 25 choirs from three different states for the day-long event. The directors decided to raise the registration fee just slightly and attract attendees and audience by making the upcoming concert a benefit—not for themselves but rather for someone else in need, someone outside their community. According to Laurence, the decision was, in fact, based on the part of the event’s mission statement stating that, in addition to providing a ringing opportunity, it may “at the discretion of the governing body, also provide financial assistance to handbell choirs or members of the American Guild of English Handbell Ringers who are in serious documented need.”

“Thanks to the generosity of the audience in Nyack, New York,” according to Laurence, “enough money was collected at the free 2006 concert to replace a three-octave set of handbells that had been washed out to sea during Hurricane Katrina.”

That set was lost by First Presbyterian Church,

of Gulfport, Mississippi. Laurence said, “One of our Hudson Valley directors generously donated an antique two-octave set of Schulmerich bells, and, with the donations from the concert, we purchased the third octave from Schulmerich.” She said that the Schulmerich company renovated the antique set to match the new ones, “giving the good people of Gulfport a beautiful three-octave set of handbells.” Abi Gray and Susan Guse flew from New York to Mississippi to deliver the bells to the congregation.

It became apparent that a new tradition of using the Hudson Valley Festival as a means to raise money for others was indeed what the organization needed to keep the event going. Guse commented, “By focusing outside our own troubles, we were able to bring hope to a

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handbell program devastated by Katrina and, in the process, save ourselves.”

More Projects

Learning that the audience at Nyack College was motivated to a greater extent to give generously when the benefit was for more than support of the next festival, part of the offering in 2007 was used to buy a set of Malmark bells for Grace Episcopal Church in New Orleans, whose director not only wanted to use them for his own parish, but also to start a music program for the young people in the community.

Then two years ago the free will offering was used to buy a new set of hand chimes to add to Area II’s lending program. They were borrowed by an elementary school in Warwick, New York, whose young ringers played for the audience at the festival to showcase what they had been learning that past year.

The Cambodia Project

“With this background of giving,” said Laurence, “it was natural for the directors of the Festival to collect an offering not only to fund the next festival, but in addition to support the purchase of new handchimes for the girls in Cambodia.”

Three octaves of chimes were purchased with a generous discount from Malmark, and Laurence, along with Donna Matson, flew with them from New York to Cambodia the second week in January of this year. Laurence said, “We will never forget the joy and fascination on the faces of these young girls when they first heard the sound of the handchimes at their

group residence in Phnom Penh.”

Approximately 18 South Asian girls and the two American teachers spent a week together, exploring the instrument and different ways to make music, without being able to read from a printed score. Laurence said the students learned the value of cooperation and uniformity of motion. She said they were encouraged to find their own voices with the instrument, to take turns leading music-making with the group, and to be inventive and expressive. They mentored each other, encouraging one another to play beautifully and precisely. She said, “They handled the instrument with the utmost respect and care, always washing their hands before touching the chimes. We explored Cambodian music and began to learn how to incorporate the instrument within their musical tradition.”

The staff musician at White Lotus was given teaching tools to be able to continue the music education of the girls after Laurence and Matson left. Laurence said, “She knows that we can always be in touch, thanks to the computer and e-mail. Several chime books were donated to White Lotus for reference and use by other musicians in the area.”

The addition of handchimes to the education of these teenaged residents supports perfectly the mission of White Lotus, which, according to Laurence, encourages spiritual stability, healthy social interaction, and accountability through friendships and mentoring relationships. “With White Lotus,” she said, “women and girls get a new chance, and hope for the future. The chimes give them a new and exciting tool with which to achieve these goals.” 