

Music becomes emerging ministry for Blue Suspenders

By Teresa A. Parson

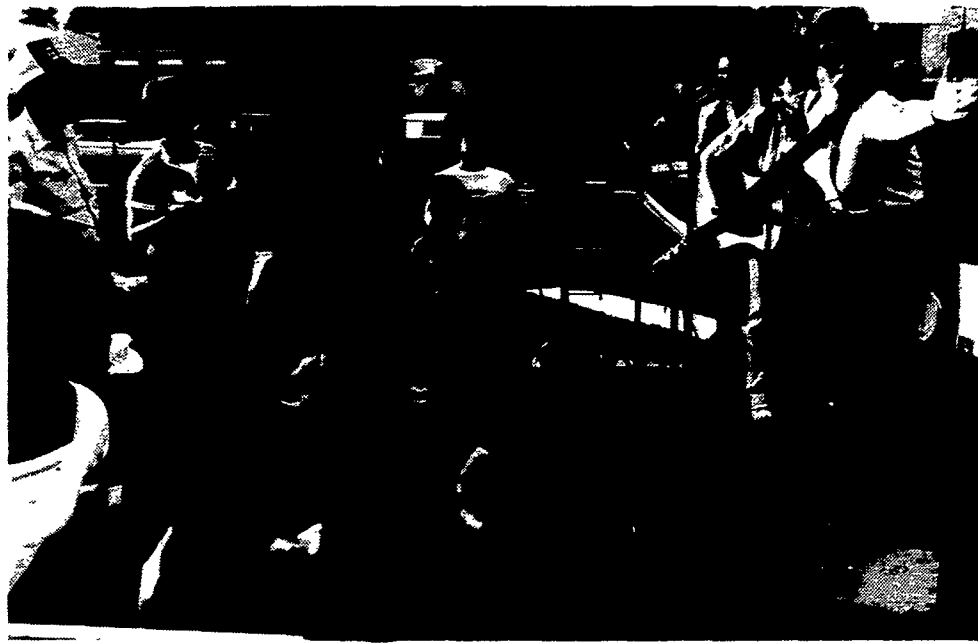
It was hot and muggy at the Oakman Street Community Garden Friday evening, August 1. Rain, which had fallen intermittently throughout the day, left the ground soggy and held to barely two dozen the crowd gathered for a picnic and concert organized by Rochester's Politics of Food Task Force.

Two members of the Blue Suspenders, a group of Sisters of St. Joseph who recently began performing at benefits, stood next to a tiny makeshift stage constructed from produce crates. Sister Chris Wagner and Sister Eileen Curtiss steered curious children away from their sound equipment and guarded electrical cables from volunteers who were zealously cutting the grass as they surveyed the dismal turnout.

It had already been a long week for Sister Chris, peace and justice director of the Genesee Valley Office of Social Ministry, and Sister Eileen, an occupational therapist at the Mary Cariola Center. They waited anxiously for a third member of the group, Sister Diana "Tobey" Dolce to arrive, hoping to squeeze in a practice session before they were scheduled to perform. The group's fourth member, Sister Beth Sutter, was away on vacation.

As showtime approached, the two sisters strung electrical cables to a nearby house and set up their equipment.

With about 15 minutes to spare, Sister Diana arrived, and the group members hastily went over their music. They weren't sure what to play. The audience was a hodge-podge of blacks and whites, Hispanics and Southeast Asians, children and adults. Sprinkled among



Sister Diana "Tobey" Dolce of the Blue Suspenders extends her hand to mark the target in a watermelon-seed spitting contest.

the neighborhood residents were several of the sisters' friends and members of the sponsoring organization.

"The whole thing kind of took me by surprise," Sister Diana said. "I didn't expect the crowd to be what it was, and I didn't think they'd like the music."

"I needed about 10 minutes to be bent out of shape. Then I thought 'There are people here who are making a real effort to come and

hear us," she said.

Less than half an hour later, the audience was on its feet, clapping, singing and even dancing in front of the stage. "I was surprised that the older guys joined right in, dancing around in a circle," Sister Diana said. "Sometimes we can get so caught up in the music and how we're performing it that we forget we're supposed to encourage people to sing and play along."

But before their set was over, it was the crowd that was doing the encouraging, asking the group for just a few more songs.

That's become something of a pattern for the Blue Suspenders ever since Sister Margaret Mancuso, Sister Eileen and Sister Diana founded the group in 1966.

"We had been playing together since we entered (the congregation)," Sister Diana explained. "Then we went to a Sisters of St. Joseph Federation event in Buffalo. There was a group of about 14 sisters there from La Grange, Ill., called the Pink Garters. They led a sing-a-long, and everybody had a ball. Several members of the Sisters of St. Joseph came up to us and said 'You could do that.'"

So they began performing at congregational events several times each year. The group took its name from the blue bib overalls they wore onstage at one time. Those have since been scaled back to suspenders.

Eventually, because she was based outside Rochester, the group's pianist, Sister Margaret, decided to drop out of the group.

But their popularity continued to grow. "It got to the point where we couldn't go to a party without somebody asking us to play or putting a guitar in our hands," Sister Diana said.

About a year and a half ago, Sister Chris and Sister Beth joined the group. "People started telling us we were good, and we started believing it," Sister Eileen said.

"We all had a really good time and people really liked the music," Sister Chris recalled. "It just went from there."

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Universities and other groups in several nations have benefitted from the trio's courses on healing ministry. Their course for doctors has been accredited by the American

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