

Marriage & Family Life

The Monroes make music a family affair

By Lee Strong
Senior staff writer

According to one old adage, "The family that plays together, stays together."

The Monroe family has added its own spin to the saying. They do indeed play together — using musical instruments.

And they have most definitely stayed together.

The Monroes have been a part of the Rochester music scene since the early 1970s, offering an eclectic mix of folk, blues, baroque and whatever musical style strikes their fancy.

In the process, they are promoting traditional family values of togetherness and growth.

At first, the group comprised Mary Ellen and Dennis Monroe, who were married on May 19, 1973, at Pittsford's St. Louis Church.

In recent years they have been joined on stage by their two oldest children: 18-year-old Nicholas and 16-year-old Mary Kathryn. Down the road they may be joined by 9-year-old Michael and 6-year-old Suzanne.

"It wasn't something like I said, 'I want to make our kids play with us,'" Mary Ellen explained. "It just happened."

That the Monroe children have taken to music is not surprising considering the environment in which they grew up. They heard their parents rehearsing for their own performances and playing for fun with guests who came over for parties or dinner. The children also listened

as their father conducted music lessons to help the family pay its bills.

Indeed, music is part of what led Mary Ellen and Dennis to get together in the first place.

Mary Ellen, who grew up in Pittsford studying voice and music, had begun to perform locally.

Dennis, who was born in Virginia, Minn., also became involved with music early in life. He moved to New York City to be part of the folk scene there, pausing for a few months in Rochester en route. After a stay in New York, he returned to Rochester, which he had come to know and like during that earlier stay.

One night in 1972, Dennis was playing at a party when he met Mary Ellen.

"I was immediately attracted to her," Dennis recalled.

"I was really impressed by his musicality," Mary Ellen said.

They were married within six months. Dennis widened his musical horizon through Mary Ellen. She was enamored of the film, *Romeo and Juliet*, and its baroque music. Dennis, who had no formal musical training, enjoyed the music as well, but through it also realized his own musical limitations. Thus began years of lessons which led ultimately to a bachelor's degree in music from Empire State College in 1988.

The couple's meeting was also part of another significant change in Dennis' life.

Raised a Lutheran, he had begun to search other faiths by experimenting with Eastern religions. But one night a



S. John Wilkin/Staff photographer

The Monroes, comprising (from left) Mary Kathryn, Nicholas, Dennis and Mary Ellen Monroe performed at the Valley Manor Home in Rochester on Jan. 24.

few days before the party at which he met Mary Ellen, he grew so frustrated that he got on his knees and prayed for help. Mary Ellen, who had recently rediscovered her own Catholic faith, proved to be that help. Inspired by her zeal, Dennis converted to Catholicism.

They have been able to weather the ups and downs of 20 years together — struggling at times to support themselves and their four children while finding work as musicians — in part because of their faith.

"I think every marriage is challenging in a society that doesn't encourage and support marriage," Mary Ellen said. "We really try to let the Holy Spirit guide us."

The path they have chosen has led to some tough times, Dennis acknowledged. They have been unable to buy their children some of the things that society promotes as "needed" — such as video games and computers. But being

free from those demands also enables the family to do more together, he observed.

"I sit down at the kitchen table with my younger kids and draw," Dennis explained. "I sit with Michael and look at his baseball cards. There's so many things you can do with people that are simple things."

Even as the Monroes try to keep things simple, however, the family is also seeing life becoming more complicated.

In addition to Dennis' music lessons and their performance schedule, they have involved themselves in the last few years with a self-produced storytelling series, *Out Into the Garden*. The program was broadcast last fall on a number of public radio stations around the country. A new season of the series is in the works for next fall, Mary Ellen said.

Meanwhile, they have created a new arts and education organization called Ora Publications, Inc., to promote music and storytelling. Ora will assist and provide support and encouragement for area artists, Dennis noted.

The not-for-profit organization is also likely to help the Monroes with their own educational efforts.

"What we are trying to do with our music is to gently draw people back to the past, to stimulate them to learn more about history," Mary Ellen said.

In addition, through their music and storytelling, they have been trying to offer an alternative to the negative, violent messages provided in today's society, Mary Ellen continued.

"I feel the American entertainment industry is selling us down the river. They're not doing the job of providing wholesome family entertainment," Mary Ellen said. "We're trying to call upon (people's) imaginations so that they can be uplifted and encouraged to be hopeful, productive, creative people."

Sacred Heart schedules wedding music concert

ROCHESTER — Sacred Heart Cathedral, 296 Flower City Park, will host the fifth annual Wedding Music Concert on Sunday, February 13, at 2:30 p.m. The program features selections for every need in a wedding ceremony or Mass.

The program will include selections offered by five parish soloists who are also experienced as cantors. The Cathedral Choir will also perform various pieces.

Dr. J. William Greene, cathedral organist and choirmaster, will play at least four processional and recessional for the organ, including traditional and newer selections.

The concert is free and open to the public. Couples planning weddings are especially welcome. For information, call the rectory at 716/254-3221.

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