

# FEATURE

## Sister Whitley turning over star-studded work

By Kathleen Schwar  
Staff writer

Sister Nancy Whitley, RSM, could talk about the celebrities she has brought to Rochester to perform benefit concerts for the Sisters of Mercy — maybe Shirley Jones, Rosemary Clooney, Rich Little, or Peter, Paul and Mary.

But to her, the big names are Ginny Cornyn, Sue Barnes, Charlotte Clarke, Nancy Wise, Leslie Maloy, and other current or former area professionals in corporate public relations and related fields.

A teacher by training, Sister Whitley has been director of development for 15 years for the Sisters of Mercy, and these people have taught her what she needs to know, she said. That includes traits needed for planning the concerts.

"You have to be what I call assertive, I wouldn't say aggressive — that always means a little beyond pushy," she said. "Tenacious" is appropriate, she added.

She backs that view with Scripture, citing the story in Luke about a widow who persistently sought a judge's decision against her adversary.

"The only way he could get her off his back was to give her what she wanted," she said. "I was preaching on that, and said, 'HMMMMM.'"

So she re-approached a corporation for a donation — through one of her professional resources — and came away with the \$720.50 she requested. That made up for tickets sold at cost for one concert.

After 15 years of overseeing concerts, Sister Whitley will take charge of her last show Dec. 3 when the Stars of the Lawrence Welk Show perform at



S. John Wilkin/Staff photographer  
Sister Nancy Whitley, RSM, stands by tickets available for the last show she is promoting, the Stars of the Lawrence Welk Show, Dec. 3.

the Eastman Theatre. She plans to leave her job as development director June 30. Whoever succeeds her will carry on what Sister Whitley sees as the spirit of Catherine McAuley, founder of the Sisters of Mercy. Mother McAuley linked "rich to poor, the sick to the healthy, the uneducated to the educated," she said.

Money raised locally through her efforts supports Sister of Mercy ministries, including the St. Michael Woodshop for teaching youths carpentry, the Andrew Center foster home, and House of Mercy for inner-city poor. Mercy Founders

Club concert proceeds go entirely to the sisters' education, to prepare them for these and other ministries.

The concerts average \$50,000 profit and bring in one-quarter to one-third of total development funds; they've raised more than \$1 million since 1982, Sister Whitley said.

The club's first show was the Leahy Family concert. Sister Whitley recalled that about 300 of 3,000 seats were sold for one of their two Eastman Theatre concerts.

"You know what that looks like?" she said. "It looks like a peanut in a haystack." She ended up giving away thousands of

tickets, yet made \$21,000 through program ads and patron donations.

Despite such success and contact with the big names that came later, she said there is "more than getting out there and bringing in money. ... There's more to the executive world, more to the media world, more to the world of stars."

Many of the stars have sad lives, she said. Judy Collins, for example, seemed particularly brooding and preoccupied during her visit, Sister Whitley recalled. At one point, she put her arm around the singer and said, "You know, I'm praying for you." Collins sobbed. And later Sister Whitley heard that her son committed suicide. She and Collins have kept in touch.

"Each person becomes a part of our lives," Sister Whitley said. "I want the stars to see the Sisters of Mercy hospitality a little differently."

After each patrons' reception at the motherhouse she escorts performers out to their limousines. The route takes them past the chapel. "No, no, I don't offer," she makes clear. "I say, 'Don't you want to see the chapel?'" Then she gently swings the person inside.

The development director has decided it is time for a fresh approach for her development efforts, however. She has applied to join a team of sisters at the Mercy International House in Dublin for a temporary position. Their work involves managing tours for the public and retreats for sisters, the archives, and perhaps some fundraising.

The "house" is the original convent started by Mother McAuley, Sister Whitley noted.

"It would be a wonderful opportunity to walk in her footsteps," she concluded.

## Elisabeth von Trapp's music expresses reflection, variety

By Rob Cullivan  
Staff writer

The sound of music can produce some unexpected moments for Elisabeth von Trapp, who performed a benefit concert Nov. 18 at St. Charles Borromeo Church in Greece on behalf of the parish's prayer center.

"I was just working on a song today with my violinist," she said during a phone interview from her home in Vermont. "He said to me, 'It sounds like Austrian music.'"

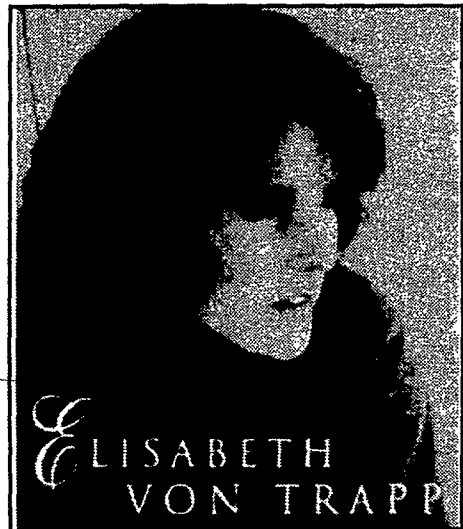
Von Trapp stated this as if she were a bit surprised to have written music that evokes her ancestral homeland. Her famous grandparents and her father and his siblings — The Von Trapp Family Singers — fled that homeland during its Nazi era. However, to the listener, her dalliance in Austrian folk melodies seems consistent with von Trapp's apparent willingness to play any piece of music that moves her.

Take, for example, her first album, "Wishful Thinking." Recorded in 1994, it contains songs written by artists ranging from Van Morrison and Leonard Cohen to Guy Clark and Jimi Hendrix, and even a tune composed by von Trapp with lyrics based on the 121st Psalm.

In fact, von Trapp has set a number of the Psalms to music, and pointed out that she draws much of her lyrical inspiration from her spiritual outlook on life. She added, however, that she is not a religious singer, but rather an artist unafraid to tackle weighty subjects with a spiritual element.

"What I want people to understand is that it is secular ... and yet it's reflective," she said of her music.

For anyone who wishes to seek out and understand what von Trapp means, "Wishful Thinking," serves up a live recording of her acoustic-guitar-oriented fare. Also featuring her accompanying violinist, Peter Fairbanks Miller, the album



contains 13 songs the pair performed during a summer evening concert in her birthplace of Stowe, Vt.

Von Trapp's voice evokes comparisons with Linda Ronstadt and even, at times, a softer version of Joan Baez's. But von

Trapp makes it clear that her greatest musical role model is her famous late grandmother, Maria von Trapp, immortalized by Julie Andrews' performance in the "Sound of Music."

Despite some differences between the real-life von Trapps and the family portrayed on stage and screen, Maria's granddaughter noted that Andrews' robust performance did pay a fitting and accurate tribute to the spirited woman she knew as her grandmother.

"My grandmother was like that, and I figured I'd better take that as a cue," she said. Nonetheless, von Trapp is determined

to be known as an artist in her own right, and is working on another album that will showcase her talents in the studio. Although she currently records on her own label, she hopes to be picked up by a major recording company. A clothing business she has run for years is on the wane, and von Trapp hopes to perform around the country to as wide an audience as possible.

"I really enjoy connecting with people," she said. "People who enjoy music."

EDITORS' NOTE: For information on Elisabeth von Trapp, write her at Box 827, Waitsfield, VT 05673, or call 802/496-3171.

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