

SENIOR LIFESTYLES

Learning organ is all in the touch

By Kathleen Schwar
Assistant editor

Jeanne Pellerin was playing the piano in a kindergarten classroom at Geneva's St. Stephen School with three widely respected musicians watching.

"I was a nervous wreck," she said.

But she did well at her Nov. 16 audition and was accepted as the first student in the Diocese of Rochester's program "Providing Musicians for the Future."

Retired from Cornell University in Ithaca, where she was executive staff assistant in admissions and financial aid, Pellerin has been playing the organ for her church, Holy Cross of Dryden. But her background is in piano, not the organ.

"I had the uneducated idea you could never let go of the keys," she said, explaining that she tried hard to connect them as she played.

The diocesan program linked her with a Cornell University professor, Annette Richards, for lessons funded by Holy Cross Parish and the diocese. She is learning the many pedals, the split keyboard, the stops, and how to touch the keys for different types of sound.

"I'm not looking to become a super organ player, I'm looking to become more proficient at what I do for liturgy," Pellerin said. She's had eight lessons, about half of her first-year commitment. Students can continue under the program for three years.

"I never played pedals," Pellerin said. "I'm learning pedals. It's a painful process to get your feet where they have to go, for each piece."

Pellerin's mother taught piano and started Pellerin and her siblings on it in her hometown of Waterville, Maine. Her father was a violinist.

"We grew up having music parties," she said. "The whole family would get together, my mother would play, my father would play and everybody would sing."

While majoring in business education at Trinity College, Pellerin said, "I was so unhappy without piano in my life, I went next door to the (Vermont) conservatory. So I continued taking piano two years," she said.

She earned her bachelor of science degree in business education because she figured she wouldn't have to teach, as she would have had to with a music degree. Yet



she did end up teaching business for several years.

Pellerin was a "wonderful candidate" for the diocesan program, said Ginny Miller, the diocese's associate director of liturgy.

The diocese started the program to deal with a growing shortage of organists.

"If you studied piano, you may be out in the wings waiting," Miller added. The program is open to people who play the piano but want to learn organ to play in church, as well as to people who play the organ in church but want to work on their skills. The diocese offers the parish \$100 after the parish funds the player's first 15 lessons, which usually run \$500-600.

Miller suggested interested people contact her at the Pastoral Center, 716/328-3210 or 800/388-7177.

Pellerin recalled that Barbara Ivers, her parish's director of religious education, pointed out to her a diocesan e-mail message about the program.

"I thought, 'Oh, what a wonderful opportunity,'" she said. The fact that the program would link her with a teacher in her area was a plus, Pellerin said, adding, "I can't take advantage of so many liturgical things that take place in Rochester. It's two hours away."

Ivers said the parish council accepted the proposal with the attitude, "Of course we're going to do this."

"It's going wonderfully," Ivers said. "The way she's approaching the playing now leads the congregation better. It's really cool."

The church has acquired an early-20th century Skinner pipe organ, for the investment of \$1 paid to its former owner, Wells College of Aurora, plus four years' time — thousands of hours of volunteer labor — on the part of Pellerin's husband, Roger, and other parishioners.

Roger is a retired Cornell agricultural engineer, and two of the others are engineers, Pellerin noted. "The three didn't know anything about the organ. They're engineers and, you know, it's like a big puzzle: 'We can put this together.'"

She still marvels at the volunteers' work restoring the organ and its console.

"All I have to do is move my fingers to make beautiful sound," she said, "but they put all this together."

Still, she said, she's not proficient enough to play for weddings, and turns down such requests.

Her mother, the late Geraldine Bolduc, apparently set high standards.

Her mother attended college in 1929 to become a piano teacher, Pellerin said, and her grandparents bought their daughter a grand piano. Then one day a church asked if Bolduc would substitute for its organist.

"Oh my goodness, history repeats itself," Pellerin said. "She must be chuckling looking down, 'Here's Jeanne playing the organ.' We've had some smiles thinking about that."

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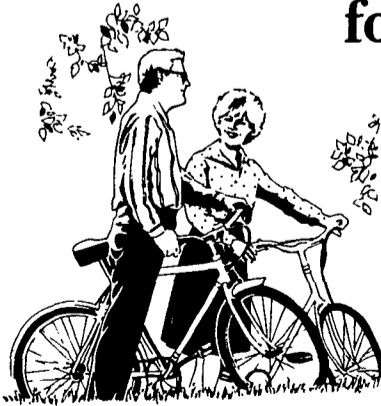
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