

# St. John Neumann actors, audience moved by spirit

By **BETTY WUND**

Special to the Star and Wave

**NORTH CAPE MAY** — The St. John Neumann Spirit Players are a community of people filled with the spirit of God who entertain audiences.

That spirit carries over to the audience during musical productions, when they encourage the audience to sing along when they know the lyrics.

The most recent production, presented over two weekends in November, was entitled "Music through the Ages." Both cast members and the audience were taken down memory lane with hit tunes from the 1930s and '40s through the 50s and 60s and finally into the 70s and 80s. Each segment was directed respectively by Eileen Casey, Peg Taylor, Sue Mulville and Judy Viscuso. Each has been developing their ability to direct with Bernie Henry as their mentor.

"It's all about them, not me," Henry said. "I just try to put people in a place where they can develop and have fun."

The purpose of each show is to use the cast members' talents to benefit the show, according to Henry. For the past seven years, Henry has developed the productions. Cast members representing many different backgrounds and stages of life participate in the productions put together twice a year at the Parish Hall of St. John Neumann Roman Catholic Church, at 680 Townbank Road.

Couples, singles and a grandmother and her grandchild participated in this produc-

tion. Bette Barbore-Ulasevich and Fran Guinan are the oldest cast members. The youngest is 6 years old. Barbore-Ulasevich sang, "Thanks for the Memories." Guinan was an Elvis impersonator lip-syncing a rendition of "Don't Be Cruel." Over 90 years of age, they are a testament to the enthusiasm reflected by the cast members. It is obvious they enjoy being able to participate in the show and inspire the audience.

In seven years, the cast has grown from 16 to as large as 27. This year there was a total of 12. Rosemary and Fred Klemm have been in several productions. He is Billy Joel's "Piano Man" in the show. Avid ballroom dancers, Lucille and Bob Kalunchik waltz to "Apple Blossom Time." Participating for the first time, it is obvious they enjoyed being part of the cast and will participate again.

"Our mission is to bring joy to those around us," Henry said. "It's about getting everyone who wants to, to be involved no matter what they are capable of doing."

Henry was asked to organize a program for teens when he served on St. John of God's council seven years ago. He was unsuccessful at first until he put an ad in the church newspaper. To his surprise, older adults came forward with an interest in the show. They were enthusiastic and many, alone and looking for something different to focus on, made up the first cast.

"I have been told by several cast members, widowed or alone because of the death of a family member, that this group saved their lives," Henry said. "Many friend-



**Betty Wund**/Special to the CAPE MAY STAR AND WAVE

Louise Kerr, who participated in the St. John Neumann Spirit Actors in the 1970s and 1980s, stands with director Judy Viscuso. Cast members representing many different backgrounds and stages of life participate in the productions.

ships have developed over the years."

The group was named Spirit Players by Marie Scioscle. She was one of the original cast members. It was accepted

immediately, Henry said. Aply named, it is a special show filled with a spirit that results in a warm exchange between cast members and the audience.

All are welcome into the cast and they help each other to bring a warm and memorable show to the audience. Family and friends share in special moments with the cast. Those

moments signal a successful presentation or show how a cast member has overcome a disability. There is no limit to participation only emphasis on what the cast member can contribute best to the show.

With a background in theater, Henry attributes any success as a director to working with some of the finest directors in New York. Some performers are challenged in dancing he said. Some have a problem remembering lyrics. Neither crutches, canes nor failing eyesight deter the cast members. As they say, the smell of greasepaint and the lure of the stage captivate them and bring joy to them and the audience.

Henry attributes the success of these productions to choreographer Doris Ray and music director MaryAnn Fortuna. Jim McLaughlin and "Debbie Lynn" provided music accompaniment and Susan Lent assisted with recorded music and the playbill. The support of St. John of God's pastor, Father Soprano, and approval for use of the Parish Hall has made for a successful community effort.

The productions are supported by donations from the audiences and the cast members. They have been for the most part upbeat and carry the message that our faith and optimism can carry us through life according to Henry. Previous productions have been adaptations of well-known shows highlighting their music interspersed with skits. Watch for the next production. It will be announced on the lighted sign at the church on Town Bank Road.

## Food pantry struggling to meet need

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receive food stamps but that they are not adequate for all their needs.

Weech said the food pantry also sees a number of people on some sort of disability. He said the mission of the ministry is to help but not make it a "permanent fix."

"We want to be able to assist the individual for that immediate time period until they can get back into the employment arena," he said.

Some of those who recover financially return to the food pantry with a check or food to show their gratitude, he said.

A number of people who use the food bank are single parents.

"There are a lot of families that come in with two or three

kids," Weech said. "Sometimes they are domestic situations we refer as needed to other entities."

He said the ministry tries to partner with other organizations to help solve problems.

The food pantry and thrift store exist because local residents support the ministry financially.

"If they're not able to support themselves and their families, then they are definitely not able to support an organization or program like this," he said. "There is a trickling effect."

Weech said the ministry encourages participants to try to better their condition, in particular from an education perspective, if they have limited skills or training.

He said he has assisted peo-

ple in their early 20s who are not working and may have two or three children and another one on the way.

"It causes one to wonder where your priority is if you can't take care of what you have, then do you think you will be able to take care of what's coming?" asked Weech.

A change of mindset is sometimes needed to pull a person out of poverty, he said.

For a number of years, the food pantry was just a closet located next to the church's sanctuary. In 2009, a large storage unit was built next to the fellowship hall and a section was enclosed to house the pantry.

In 2012, when Pastor Charles Gates arrived at the church, the size of the food pantry was again increased. He saw a growing need for the food pantry in the community and Weech was hired to oversee the outreach.

In 2013, construction began on a ministry center to house the food pantry and a thrift store.

He said the food pantry exists due to the kindness of the community and the church

family.

"We have private donors that help us to make sure the shelves are full, as well as our church family," Weech said. "With monetary donations, we are able to purchase food from a food bank in the Pleasantville area."

Before coming to Erma, Weech worked for "Front Step," an urban outreach in Philadelphia. He also ran a program called "Jobs for Life," which assisted people who were underemployed or unemployed to return to work.

Gates directed an urban training center in Philadelphia and the two met at a "Jobs for Life" program where the pastor was guest speaker. He invited Weech to work for the church when he answered the call to pastor Seashore Community Church of the Nazarene.

Weech said he was raised in a culture where he was taught to share.

"I remember as a child with our siblings, if we had one apple, it would be very selfish for me to eat that apple and not make an offer to my other siblings," he said. "It had to be

cut in four, six or even eight."

"If I have more than someone else, then it would be kind, it would be polite to share," continued Weech.

He said sharing was for the needy, not the greedy or those who just want a free lunch.

The food pantry helps a number of senior citizens. A woman in her 80s who lives alone and receives only \$15 per month in food stamps came to the food pantry, Weech said.

"The stories are endless," he said.

A pregnant young woman with a toddler was put out of her residence by her boyfriend. "They were sleeping in the car," Weech said.

The church invites participants to dinner, where they can meet new people and experience a sense of community.

"Sometimes the environment they come from is not the best, but getting out of that environment and being introduced to things that are new that they may not be accustomed to, it helps," he said. "Meeting people in their situation who have recovered is also very helpful."

The ministry sees a number of success stories such as an

ex-convict who became employed and was able to support his children, according to Weech.

Food bags provided to food pantry participants contain items for breakfast, lunch and dinner. He said the food pantry distributes a lot of spaghetti sauce, pasta, tuna and canned chicken.

"This is the winter season, so we run through a lot of chicken noodle soup," Weech said.

Canned fruit, hot and cold cereal and snacks for children are appreciated, as well as coffee and tea.

He said the food pantry appreciates donations of food or money.

Over the past year, the food pantry has met the need of 700 individuals and families with nonperishable monthly food bags and more than 3,500 with perishable goods.

The food pantry is open from 10 a.m. to noon Monday, Wednesday and Friday. Food is distributed on a first-come, first-served basis. Participants need to bring identification and proof of their address in Lower Township.

The church is located at 446 Seashore Road. More information is available at [www.seashorecommunity.com](http://www.seashorecommunity.com) or by calling (609) 886-6196, ext. 16. Donations of non-perishable food may be dropped off at the Museum of Cape May County, 504 Route 9N., Cape May Court House, Dec. 13 from noon to 3 p.m. during its Christmas tree fund raising event.

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