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Handbell Choir of Developmentally Disabled Adults Is 'Great Blessing'

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NASHUA, N.H. (CNS)—Sean Costello plays guitar, has hosted an MTV music program, works at a local company and has Down syndrome.

On Saturday afternoons, Costello, 43, rehearses with the Special Friends Handbell Choir at St. Christopher Parish in Nashua. It's the only handbell choir exclusively for developmentally disabled adults in the Manchester Diocese.

"It was easy to learn to play the bells," said Costello, who also is an altar server and extraordinary minister of holy Communion. He said his favorite song to play is "Amazing Grace."

Parishioners who hear the group play during Mass are inspired by the joy and enthusiasm of the musicians. "They are a great blessing for the parish," said the pastor, Father Richard Kelley.

For parish music director Jeanne Polcari, the idea to start the handbell choir came naturally. Her 20-year-old niece, Beth Donahue, has Down syndrome and is a member of Special Friends, a local group of 35 developmentally disabled adults, ranging in age from 20 to 71.

"All they needed was a chance," Polcari said, noting that people with special needs still encounter significant prejudice in their daily lives. "With the handbell choir, the group is able to get their music out to the community. People can see how capable they are, when given an opportunity."

When the choir members perform, they receive a warm reception. "Many people are moved to tears," said Barbara Keegan, whose daughter Elizabeth plays in the choir. Keegan started Special Friends in 1964 to help Elizabeth prepare for the sacraments. Parents of other special-needs children asked to be included, and Special Friends was launched.

"In the past, people with handicaps were often hidden away, but we can't let them be forgotten," she said. "They can lead very normal lives and they have much to contribute."

Today, that contribution is often overlooked. Ethicists fear that the Down syndrome population is in danger of "disappearing," because a fetal diagnosis of the syndrome often results in abortion. Some estimate the abortion rate in these circumstances is as high as 90 percent.

When the Keegan family welcomed Elizabeth in 1960, they were undaunted by her condition.

"She was gift from God and she has added a great deal to our lives," said Keegan. "From the time she was born, Elizabeth was a star. People are drawn to her." Elizabeth Keegan, who also is an extraordinary minister of holy Communion, has worked at the same company for 22 years, and is one of the most enthusiastic members of the handbell choir.

"We are one, big, happy family," Elizabeth said of the choir. "Plus, we have a genius, Jeanne, for a teacher," she added.

Polcari's interest in handbells began two years ago when she attended training sessions at a conference in Rhode Island. After launching one parish choir she turned to her second group, the Special Friends. Eight eager musicians signed up, including Polcari's niece Beth.

The impact on the group has been somewhat surprising, even to Polcari, who now serves as the special needs liaison for the American Guild of English Handbell Ringers in New England.

"It has turned out to be very therapeutic," she said, noting that the warm-up exercises and specific movements of the arms and shoulders involved in bell ringing has been beneficial for the choir members, some of whom have physical limitations.

"The action of the bell ringing frees up the body to move in a more coordinated and confident way," she said. "It truly has a healing effect on the body. In addition, the choir members are able to participate in the liturgy of the Mass, which is very

important."

Bell ringer Nancy Stocking agrees. "I like to ring the bells," she said. "I feel the prayers in the music."

Choir member Valerie Johnson said she likes "making people happy."

"I enjoy ringing the bells, and I have a lot of gifts to share," she said. "I am God's teacher. I teach people about God, patience, love, and harmony."