

# The Village Ringers

PASSIONATE, PROFESSIONAL HANDBELL CHOIR

STORY BY RICA KEENUM | PHOTOS BY BRANDON ATWELL

A clapper strikes brass, releasing a vibrant ting that fades to a hum and lingers — sweet, like a fragrance in the air. It's the sound of a handbell, an instrument with ancient roots said to have been established in England as a way for bell tower ringers to practice in private.

Thanks to Bonnie Fisher and a throng of musical friends, Villagers can experience the sound for themselves. An Ohio native and lifelong music lover, Fisher started singing and playing in early childhood.

**“Village Ringers was a dream I never thought I could make happen because of the expense of the equipment ...”** — Bonnie Fisher



Bonnie Fisher leads the Village Ringers.

“I grew up in a small church,” she said. “Everybody did something and I loved to sing, so I started at 5-years-old. By age 14, I was directing the adult choir and playing the piano.”

When asked how she accomplished such feats, she replied, “Lots of practice and exposure to music. My parents would take us to see live plays — the opening of ‘The Sound of Music,’ for example. I was in awe.”

In college, Fisher led children’s choirs and then took a job as a computer programmer, still working music into her schedule and doing rehearsals during the

week. Twelve years later, she transitioned into music as a primary career.

“I had the opportunity to make it full time at a large church,” she said. “I became a church musician and also gave piano lessons to about 40 students at a time.”

Fisher was grateful for the flexibility her new career offered, allowing her to spend more time at home with her kids. For the next 15 years, she played the organ, directed choirs and handbell choirs. In 2016, Fisher and her husband took a trip to Disney and discovered The Villages.

“We’d rented a house here, not knowing anything about the community — we were shocked,” she said. “We ended up exploring the area and deciding to retire here. We moved here cold — didn’t know a soul.”

As in the past, Fisher used music as a means to connect.

“Now I’m the accompanist at New Covenant United Methodist Church,” she said.

Bringing a bell choir to the area became her next musical mission, although it seemed an unlikely endeavor.

“Village Ringers was a dream I never thought I could make happen because of the expense of the

equipment,” she said. “I talked about it, but didn’t pursue it because of the costs.”

As the word spread, something unexpected happened.

“Someone bought and then donated the bells,” she said.

When it came time to assemble the choir, Fisher had no trouble finding willing players.

“I got 12 responses in two days, which was pretty amazing,” she said. “That’s how we got started. A miracle really.”

The Village Ringers is a 20-member choir, comprised of experienced musicians who, like Fisher, have a passion for playing the unique instrument.

“We like to think it’s a unique sound,” she said. “We have bells that weigh less than a pound and some that weigh 18 pounds. It takes a lot of strength — even to work with the little ones because you’re constantly moving with them.”

It’s a new adventure for members, Fisher notes

— playing secular music such as the John Williams Medley, a Star Wars song, and music from the film E.T.

“And we’re doing a Disney medley — it’s very cool,” she said.

Fisher pulls out a sheet of music and points to a staff. “Here are the bells needed for this piece. We need 14 players for this one, and each person is assigned to a bell. It’s a synchronized team effort.”

As players work together, the handbells swing and the sound sweeps listeners into a quiet state of bliss.

“It’s a very pure kind of sound,” Fisher said. “Music is a voice without words.”

### UPCOMING CONCERT

7 p.m., October 26 | Rohan Regional Recreation Center

Tickets will be available at any Villages Box Office or via The Villages Entertainment website.



Members Donna Kagan, Emily Spann, Cary Robinson and Lana McKinzie.