

# LET THE BELLS RING — BONNIE FISHER AND THE VILLAGES RINGERS

BY JOSEPH SIRIOTIS

Tower bells were used to announce births, weddings, funerals and even when it was time for stores to open and close. But practice was required to master their rhythm. This could be annoying since they were loud enough to be heard throughout the town.

Hence, the invention of the handbell. They were small enough to not wake up the neighbors, but also provided a melody so pleasant that they have become almost synonymous with church music.

Centuries later, Club President Bonnie Fisher and her group, The Villages Ringers, carry on the tradition of bringing joy to all who listen to the various sounds of this simple, yet complex instrument.

“It was just a dream when we started in 2018,” Bonnie said. “There were clubs for everything except handbells.”

Bonnie heard the bells for the first time when she lived in Ohio, but it wasn’t love at first ring for her.

“It was more of an acquired taste,” Bonnie said.

Cathy Bullock, Bonnie Fisher  
and Tracy Hofmeister.



A talented pianist, she was hired as the music director for her local church, but one of her many responsibilities included directing the bell choir. She did whatever she could to get up to speed.

"I had to learn really fast," Bonnie said. "They sent me to some workshops and some things that were really helpful and I just grew to love them from there."

She connected with other Villagers in any way she could when she moved down in 2018. To her surprise, she found out through social media and advertisements she wasn't alone. She started holding auditions.

"We had over twenty people show up," Bonnie said. "It was amazing. Now we audition every year and (current ringers) have to reaudition every year."

Which is why ringer Cathy Bullock recommends talking to Bonnie first if you've never played an instrument before. She showed a music sheet they would have to read when playing. It wasn't for the average beginner.



"People will come up and I'll ask them 'Do you read music?'" Cathy said. She imitated the usual response she gets. "Eh, a little bit," she said. "They don't realize that you really have to work at it. A good bell choir makes it look relatively easy."

Cathy has been with the club since last spring, but her experience with music goes back more than 30 years. She started out with the piano and clarinet in her early years. But she felt a pull towards playing the handbells when she graduated from college.

"I started going to my home church since I was back in the area," Cathy said.

She had to set them down when her career took off as a journalism professor. The native New Yorker found herself travelling to South Carolina, Georgia, Washington then Utah before finding her way home to The Villages. It didn't take her long to start finding a group that shared her passion for ringing. In fact, it was a prerequisite.

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"A cousin had said there's a ringing group here," Cathy said. "I immediately checked out The Village Ringers before we moved. I didn't want to let it go."

She not only plays for the Ringers, but also the First Presbyterian Church in Leesburg.

"It's kind of a rush," Cathy said.

Part of the excitement is seeing how far bells have come. They keep coming up with new ways to make sounds, she said. It's one thing to use proper technique to achieve the right ring. It's another to use the proper technique to imitate the sound of Cinderella crying.

"We had two young composers," Cathy said. "One of them composed a piece called Cinderella's Escape. She had the ringers come walking up to two bowls of water. They were ringing the bells and dipping them. It sounded like Cinderella was crying."

A key component to being a successful bell group is the camaraderie. Tracy Hofmeister is one of the newest members of the group, and a non-Villages resident. In her 20 years of bell ringing she is amazed at the support she has received from everyone. "Handbells is a team sport," Tracy said. "I was pleasantly surprised by how they support one another outside the choir."

Even if that means playing grandparent, Tracy noted. More than one member has offered to babysit for her last minute. One of her biggest challenges in the club has been switching positions frequently. She appreciates the challenge though, as it always keeps her engaged.

"Everyone should have something they do just for themselves," Tracy said. "It should be something that puts a smile on your face no matter how bad your day has been. As strange as it might sound, for me, that's ringing handbells."

The Villages Ringers will be performing at the **Gift of Giving** sponsored by The Villages Recreational Department at Lake Sumter Landing Market Square. It will be held **Dec. 13 at 9 a.m.** You can also catch them at the spring concert, **Patriotic Spectacular!** It will be held **Apr. 15 at 7 p.m.** For more information on joining The Villages Ringers, please visit [villageringers.com](http://villageringers.com).