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Ship Honors Student Discovers Role with Angel Choir

Katy Malone, a freshman in the Shippensburg University Honors Program, has found a special way to combine her love for music with her desire to help people with developmental disabilities.

Malone is serving as assistant director of the Angel Handbell Choir, an instrumental ensemble designed for adults with physical and mental disabilities. The choir is sponsored by St. John’s Evangelical Lutheran Church of Mercersburg.

“The choir members I work with have so much joy in what they do as part of this group,” says Malone, an English secondary certification major from Chambersburg. “It’s just a great experience for anyone to see.”

Founded in 1987, the handbell choir is made up of 22 adult ringers with various levels of physical or mental disability, assisted by nine volunteers. Some of the angels live on their own, while others live with family or in group homes. The choir members are largely from Franklin County but also travel from Fulton County and Washington County, Md.

Last fall, choir director Nancy Rice was looking to bring someone on board as an assistant who could help in a larger capacity than a regular volunteer. Malone’s musical experience was mostly vocal—she sang in the glee club at Chambersburg Area Senior High School and the youth choir at Corpus Christi Catholic Church of Chambersburg—but she decided to give instrumental music a shot.

As assistant director, Malone’s responsibilities include conducting, filling in on bells if an angel is absent, and helping coordinate the choir’s concerts and appearances. Those concerts have taken them to homeless shelters, shopping malls, civic events, churches, and other venues.

“Katy is a welcome addition to our team of assistants and a delight to our ringers,” says Rice. “Her unassuming demeanor and quick sense of humor helped her find a place in the angels’ hearts rather quickly. Katy’s willingness to listen, watch, and question later makes her a quick study!”

Working with persons with mild mental retardation isn’t new for Malone: her mother, Karen, is a life skills support teacher at Mercersburg Elementary School, and Malone has visited her classroom many times.
For Malone, the biggest challenge of being assistant director is the actual conducting because there’s no traditional musical score to read. Instead, the choir uses a SMART board with a laptop and projector to display symbols that correspond to specific bells.

The angels rehearse every Tuesday afternoon at St. John’s for about an hour and perform regularly from September to May. The choir’s repertoire includes oldies, hymns, and plenty of Christmas music for the holiday season—the time of year they’re in highest demand.

“Part of our mission with honors students is to promote leadership and service,” says Dr. Kim Klein, Honors Program director at Shippensburg University. “Katy is an outstanding example of what leadership and service look like when practiced in the community.”

“You see how difficult life can be for the angels, yet they’re doing something no one expected them to do—and doing it as well as any other bell choir,” says Malone. “It’s just amazing to see what they can do when you show them.”

The Honors Program at Shippensburg University provides an outstanding undergraduate experience that emphasizes scholarship, leadership, and service. The program is made up of 150 students who benefit from small classes, outstanding instruction, exciting research, study abroad, and internship opportunities, and special social and cultural activities. For more information, visit www.ship.edu/honors.