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The Piano Lady

She plays the music that gives the party its punctuation mark

By Lorraine McClish
staff writer

WENDY ROLLIN closed the doors on Arbor Realty, walked away from a successful business and never looked back; she'd rather be playing Cole Porter than filling out a purchase agreement.

"I think I must have sold half of the houses in that subdivision over there," she said of recently developed property in the Drake-13 Mile area. "But it precluded anything else. I missed the music, and I was growing weary of the business. A lot of us have the ability to sell real estate. I have a special ability to play music, so it was a transition of the heart."

Even while she was a real estate broker she kept her fingers on the keyboard, squeezing in the few engagements she could, developing a style she has turned into an art for the pianist hired to play for office parties or house parties.

"I can't remember when I've gone to work and not had a good time," she said, since she's back at the piano full time. "And after I've done my work the people I've been with are always happier."

"When I first started to play for parties — about 12 years ago — I became known as 'The Piano Lady' and I'm happy to be picking up that title again," Rollin said.

ONE OF THE requisites for being a piano player for parties is knowing how to play "New York, New York." "Without doubt, or without a second in the running, that is the most requested of all songs from those of any age who gather around a piano," Rollin said.

But whatever the song requested she'll be able to play it, because she

began playing by ear at an early age, a talent that never left her.

She is mostly self-taught. Her musical-minded family gave her "a few lessons," she said, from a neighborhood teacher when she was 8, so she could learn how to read music. Much later, when she began entertaining at parties she took some formal training from noted Detroit jazz musician Bess Bonnier because she wanted to add jazz numbers to her repertoire.

She played for folk singers while she was in Oak Park High School and then in an all-girl band and a rock band while at University of Michigan. Later she played keyboard and piano, wrote some music and did the arrangements for a band called "Interlude."

After becoming "The Piano Lady" she never advertised.

"My number wasn't even in the phone book," she said. "Every party, every luncheon, every wedding I ever played for came by way of mouth. I'm sure it was the repertoire."

"A conscious effort on my part to select songs carefully, select songs that affect people, select songs to accommodate all ages and tastes, combine the familiar with the unexpected."

"I will play the theme from 'Bevery Hills Cop,' very popular now, and follow it up with one of my own songs or one of my own arrangements of a song no one has ever heard played quite that way before," she said.

"If there is a common thread running between selling real estate and playing the piano at parties, it is that you have to know what people want and then serve it up to them," she said.

ONE OF THE first things Rollin did after closing up shop in the real

estate business was take on the job of writing the score for "Let Me Start All Over Again."

The documentary on the Salvation Army and the work it is doing on behalf of the homeless in America was written and produced by Jerry Piasecki and is being shown privately by various organizations as a fundraiser. It is scheduled to be shown on PBS this spring.

The score of despair is played by solo piano throughout most of the film, then ends on a note of hope in the Gospel genre.

"That's my serious side, but I like it all," she said.

"I know that the party piano player is sometimes thought of as the poor relative of musicianship, but it's not so. It is an art form unto itself," she said.

Rollin is very adamant that the party piano player is not to be confused with the piano player at the cocktail bar.

"He or she is definitely in the background, much like the smoke that fills the room. I make things smoke, but I smoke like fire," she said. "I add another dimension to the food and the drink and the party atmosphere. I give it its punctuation mark. I give it an impact."

"I get people tapping their toes or get the dancing started. At one office party in December a guest told me, 'he'd always wanted to sing 'Won't You Come Home Bill Bailey,' as a solo. I never played 'Bill Bailey' before. But we did it. I just don't think you could hum or sing anything that I couldn't play."

Rollin says she can also play any style. If she has developed a style of her own she says it would be "Romanticism — but upbeat romanticism."

The Piano Lady can be reached at 553-7292.



RANDY BORST/staff photographer

Pianist, composer and arranger Wendy Rollin turned her back on a successful business to devote her time to what she enjoys most, entertaining at the keyboard.



'I always wanted to join the sisterhood even as a young girl in elementary school. I feel fortunate I've always had a calling to this lifestyle.'

— Sister Francilene
Madonna College

In the top 100 Madonna's leader crackles with energy

By Tom Henderson
staff writer

ENERGY SHORTAGE? Not in the vicinity of Sister Mary Francilene, the president of Madonna College. She crackles with electricity as she surges down hallways and into meetings. Edison could tap into her and forget about nuclear power.

But it's an energy, a fervor, that is under control and directed — so well channeled, in fact, that Francilene was recently named by the Exxon Corp. as one of the top 100 college presidents in the United States.

She was one of five chosen from the state, the others being John DiBiaggio of Michigan State, Norbert Hruby of Aquinas, Harold Shapiro of the University of Michigan and Gordon VanWylen of Hope College.

FRANCILENE'S SMILE is the first thing that greets visitors, that and a firm handshake. But don't get comfortable in her big office, not if you're planning on spending much time with her, because about as soon as you sit down, you'll be up and off as she scurries from one place to another on the Madonna grounds, her smile leading the way.

Smile? There are river valleys smaller than her smile. It's a smile that makes the Cheshire cat's look like a grimace, like maybe there's a car parked where his tail used to be.

Don't mistake the smile for softness. Behind it is a sharp mind in the habit of making quick decisions.

"She's effective and efficient," said Andrea Nodge, Madonna's director of public relations, who has watched Sister Francilene run many meetings. "When you're in a meeting with her, she's very open and will ask you your opinion, but when it's time to make a decision — boom, boom, boom — she makes it."

A RECENT planning session for next summer's 40th anniversary ball was typical. Its place on the afternoon's agenda came after quick visits to the library and to the computer lab to check on the status of used, donated computers. (The new library was a project particularly dear to Francilene. "I spent a lot of time with the architects," she said.)

Francilene met to discuss the ball with Nodge, Larry Rzepka, the director of alumni and parent relations, and Sister Lauriana, the school's vice president for development. Francilene asked good

questions, got good answers and made good decisions.

At one point, she decided letters announcing the ball should go out in February. "I think February is too late," said Rzepka.

"No, it's not," said Francilene. She said it with a smile but there was a steel edge to her voice. Not unfriendly, but exceedingly firm. Next topic, please.

"I'm a good leader in a team approach," she acknowledged.

HERS is a decisive style of leadership that those close to her say is quick, but fair. She is to the point in a meeting, and those with her are supposed to be to the point, too. No wasted time, motion or energy. The meeting begins, she conducts it like a maestro leading an ensemble, and as quickly as it starts, the meeting ends. And she's out the door and down the stairs to new business elsewhere on the campus or in the community.

Maybe it helps her in conducting her meetings that she conducts elsewhere, too — as a regular guest conductor for the Oakway Symphony Orchestra. "I always direct marches, in keeping with my personality," she joked. (Francilene will conduct Oakway's 14th annual Cabaret Concert at Madonna at 8 p.m. Saturday, March 28.)

Francilene was a musician and music teacher long before it was decided she would become Madonna's president. She used to teach the tune; now she calls it.

Francilene also sings in the Felician Sisters Choir, is a member of the board of directors of the Livonia Chamber of Commerce and for a long time served on the board of the Detroit Learning and Speech Center.

FRANCILENE WAS the first of six children born to Hector and Irene Vandevyver. Four of them are married. Two are Felician sisters, Francilene and her younger sister by four years, Sister Joyce, who is the principal of St. Sabina School in Dearborn Heights.

"I always wanted to join the sisterhood, even as a young girl in elementary school," explained Francilene. "I feel fortunate I've always had a calling to this lifestyle. A very strong motivation in my life is the sense of commitment to the Lord."

Francilene is 45 and looks younger. She was 34 when she became Madonna's president and didn't look much older than many of her students. Despite a tenderness in looks and years, she had no hesitations about assuming the presidency and has never looked back wistfully to her former duties of piano

teacher at Ladywood.

"I am a person who enjoys what they're doing. When I was a music teacher I really enjoyed it, and I was good at it. . . . When I have a new responsibility, I work at it very enthusiastically, 100 percent. I don't compare one job to another, one ministry to another."

MINISTRY is the key word there. Ministry and teamwork. Francilene didn't become a college president because she had a lifelong desire to be an administrator. She became one because she was asked by her superiors. As part of her vow of obedience, she accepted.

So, in 1974 she became administrative assistant to Sister Danatha, the former president who is now director of computer services, and began course work toward her doctorate in administration, which she received three years later.

Under Francilene, Madonna's budget has grown from about \$2.7 million to \$11 million and the school has continued to expand its innovative programs.

For example, Madonna is the only college or university in the state with a full-support program for the deaf. The school began its extensive adult education program well before it became a staple at other colleges. (Half of Madonna's enrollment comes from traditional, just-out-of-high school ranks and the other half is adults attending part time.) And the school offered one of the first liberal arts majors in gerontology and now has programs in hospice education and emergency medical tech.

In the planning stages? An expansion of business administration and teacher education, a new program for licensed practical nurses to earn their bachelor's degrees, and a \$1.3-million, 12,000-square-foot Educational Development Center.

But the story of Madonna goes beyond facts and figures and new programs.

"We're building a sense of community here," said Francilene. A community that includes everyone from students to faculty to administration to the lowliest janitor. "This isn't just a job, bringing people together for a paycheck."

Francilene has grown in and with the job. "I've developed a greater listening capacity," she said. "And because I have a fast metabolism — I speak fast and walk fast — I've had to slow down and give a presence of being with these people who want to talk to me."

How else has she grown? "In my ability to write." And, with a chuckle, "my ability to answer newspaper reporters."