

Parishioner strikes chord in music, other ministries

By LISA SPELLMAN

For the Catholic Voice

"You have the voice of an angel, thank you for singing today," a parishioner called out as he left the sanctuary at St. Elizabeth Ann Seton Church in Omaha after a recent funeral.

Shelly Gray, who was getting ready to put her guitar away, smiled in his direction.

Gray, 60, said she often plays her guitar or the piano and sings at funerals and weddings, or during Mass, as well as at Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA) retreats, among other occasions. An Omaha native who converted to the Catholic faith in 1981, Gray is so immersed in the parish she joined in 1994 that she also serves as president of the pastoral council, is one of eight co-leaders in the RCIA program she has been part of for 20 years, and serves on the liturgy and vocations committees.

Gray, who has been blind since shortly after birth, also is a member of the Secular Franciscan Order in Omaha, and she recently added another role: member of a newly-formed advisory group for the Xavier Society for the Blind, the national Catholic lending library for the blind based in New York City.

She relishes the opportunity to do something more in God's service.

Gray said she was born 27 weeks premature and weighed just two pounds. The oxygen she received right after birth destroyed the optic nerves in both of her eyes, she said. Later as a child, she developed glaucoma in both eyes and eventually they were removed.

Today she has artificial eyes. Through it all Gray said God took care of her, heightening her other senses, gifting her with a love of music and singing, and giving her an interior strength.

"I had to figure out alternative ways of doing things, trusting that God would give me the grace I needed," she said.



LISA SPELLMAN FOR THE CATHOLIC VOICE

Shelly Gray strums the guitar as background music March 17 for people leaving a funeral at St. Elizabeth Ann Seton Church in Omaha.

That's just what she did when, after a very difficult marriage, Gray said she obtained an annulment and struck out on her own with her five children, always relying on her faith to guide her.

Being blind, she said, is simply a cross she bears daily. It does not define her relationship with others or with God.

"I can see with my heart and soul and that's what Jesus wants me to focus on," she said.

Gray's journey to joining the Xavier Society's advisory council began when she submitted her name in response to an ad in the society's newsletter. She is one of 10 people chosen from across the country to serve on the council; other members are from Arizona, Illinois, Florida and New York.

"We are very fortunate to have someone like Shelly serve on our advisory council," said Malachy Fallon, the society's executive director.

Gray is certainly up to the task, said her pastor, Father Frank Baumert.

"She puts her whole heart and soul into everything she does," he said. "The Xavier Society made a good choice when they appointed her to their council."

An avid songwriter, Gray remembers learning to play the piano in the second grade and picking up the guitar on her own at 15 when she began to write music.

She often performs her original compositions during Mass after Communion, and as part of the parish's Tre Ore service on Good

Friday.

"Her joyful heart is reflected in all those beautiful songs she has written," said Joan Connor, a friend of 20 years and fellow RCIA leader at St. Elizabeth Ann Seton.

Connor said she has watched Gray impact other people's lives through her music ministry, teaching and simply the way she encounters everyone she meets.

"She's always reaching out to people in faith and with love," Connor said.

Gray said she hopes her music ministry draws others closer to God. She also believes she gets just as much out of encountering others and sharing her faith as they do, "maybe even more."

"The more we journey with others in faith, the more we grow as well," she said.

Xavier Society provides free religious materials for the blind

Catholic Voice

The Xavier Society for the Blind has been offering free Catholic spiritual and inspirational materials for the visually impaired since 1900.

Founded through the inspiration of several lay women aided by a Jesuit priest, the nonprofit based in New York City provides braille versions of religious materials and audio recordings in large print vinyl records, cassette tapes and now MP3 digital format.

And Shelly Gray, 60, blind since shortly after birth and a member of St. Elizabeth Ann Seton Parish in Omaha, has joined an advisory group implemented this year by Xavier Society's executive director, Malachy Fallon.

Gray said she first learned about the society at age 23. With its help, she has acquired a Catholic Bible, the Catechism of the Catholic Church and receives the Sunday readings, as well as other readings, meditations and prayers.

Fallon said he hopes patrons such as Gray will help the nonprofit improve services, harness new technologies and find materials that grab the attention of a younger generation.

Gray said she is excited to serve.

"I want to help make the type of materials Xavier Society offers be the kind that really pierces the heart and inspires a soul-filled response that draws people closer to the Lord," she said.

ANNIVERSARIES

Celebrating marriage

Thomas and Veronica Barry will celebrate their 50th wedding anniversary at a dinner with their children, their spouses and grandchildren.



They were married April 20, 1968, at St. Peter Church in Omaha.

The couple, members of Christ the King Parish in Omaha, have four children and three grandchildren.



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FOR HOLY
MARRIAGES**