



Church expands, looks to the future

Rejoice Lutheran Church, Frisco, Texas, is looking to the future with its recent expansion. The city is one of several quickly growing areas north of Dallas. Frisco and its surrounding areas aren't just suburbs anymore, booming from just 6,000 in population in 1990 to more than 170,000 now—and steadily increasing.

An estimated 30 percent of Frisco's population is of subcontinent Indian origin. Rejoice shares a parking lot and has a developing interfaith relationship with the largest Hindu temple in North Texas. Many a Sunday morning, while members and visitors are gathering for services at Rejoice, cricket players are practicing on the fields across the street.

Hospitality is a key word at Rejoice. The Rev. Neil White has adopted a practice of standing outside the doors of the church on Sunday morning to greet those passing by, as well as those coming for worship. ☞

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Country church's investment in blind pianist pays off

Editor's note: Bethel Lutheran Church, Avoca, Texas, made the news in March. This article by Loretta Fulton appeared in the Abilene Reporter-News (March 9, 2018; reprinted with permission). This is a wonderful story about how we are #InMissionTogether.

The telephone conversation must have sounded odd to anyone who happened to be listening on one end.

"I'm blind. I can't see," Wenhui "Sherry" Dou said.

"I'm wearing hearing aids, and I can't hear," Don Heller replied.

The phone call was a job interview of sorts, with Dou (pronounced "Do"), telling Heller that she would like to be the pianist at his church, Bethel Lutheran in Jones County. But he needed to understand that she was a blind pianist.

Heller didn't care and was upbeat about the possibility of Dou becoming the organist of the historic church in Ericksdahl, close to 40 miles north of Abilene. "Let's just see what God can do," he said.

**"It's really a blessing for us.
The people are really nice."**

That was almost two years ago, and the relationship has worked beautifully.

Heller and other members of Bethel are just hoping it doesn't end this fall. Dou and her mother, Ping Lu, came to the United States from their native China so Dou could get a master's degree at Texas Christian University. But after a year there, through connections she made at a Fort Worth church, Dou decided to enroll at Hardin-Simmons University. She earned a master's degree in piano performance in May 2014, two years after enrolling.

Now, Dou, 30, has the opportunity for a performance certification at the University of Kansas beginning in the fall and may leave, at least for the year it would take to complete.

Heller and other members of the church are hoping Dou turns down that offer, but they would understand if she chooses to leave. It's a tough decision for Dou, who has found a home in Abilene and with members of the church.

"It's really a blessing for us," Dou said. "The people are really nice."

Long before coming to the United States, Dou received acclaim in China and in venues in several countries. She has performed in Bethlehem, Singapore, Beijing, Los Angeles, San Francisco and Hong Kong.

Learning by listening

How she learns to play is as amazing as her flawless performance. Dou has been totally blind since age 2 when an operation to correct glaucoma failed.

When Dou was 3, an uncle bought her a toy piano, which opened an entire new world to her. Instead of banging on it, like most 3-year-olds, Sherry began tapping out tunes she heard. Her mother immediately took note and after a few years offered to pay for music lessons—on the condition that Sherry never give up.

"I gave a nod of assent," Dou said in an interview for a previous *Reporter-News* story.

Her parents couldn't afford a real piano but bought an electronic keyboard that Dou mastered. Her mother, who is not a musician, teaches her music by "reading" a musical score to her, one note at a time, adding the key and time written for the music. Without hearing a recording of the piece, Dou and her mother are able to translate the musical score into a virtuoso performance.

Dou later was enrolled in a keyboard class, and at 7 won the top award in the Provincial Electronic Keyboard Competition of Heilongjiang, China.

Not only has Dou learned to master the piano, she also is an excellent student. She attended a school for the blind as a child before graduating from the Chinese equivalent of high school. Once she was in a traditional school, which had no Braille textbooks, she had to master a new way of learning. She learned by listening—a skill she already had mastered in music—and by dictating homework. Dou has equipment that scans text and transcribes it into an oral version. Through technology, Sherry also can type and is as proficient as the next college student at emailing and texting.

Surrounded by help

Once Dou graduated from “high school,” she earned the equivalent of a bachelor of music degree in piano from Harbin Normal University in China.

Then came the United States, where Dou and her mother remain. Her father, an engineer, still is in China and visits back and forth are rare. But both Dou and her mother, who doesn’t speak English, are managing, with the help of Hardin-Simmons friends and members of Bethel Lutheran.

Robert Tucker, dean of the College of Fine Arts at Hardin-Simmons, has been especially helpful, Dou said. For each Sunday service, Dou gets a list of hymns that her mother helps her learn. But she has to come up with music for the prelude and offertory, and Tucker helps her with that.

The folks at Bethel Lutheran have gone the extra mile so that Dou and her mother can go the 40 miles to Ericksdahl and Stamford each Sunday. Bethel Lutheran holds a smaller service in Stamford on Sundays, in addition to the service in Ericksdahl.

One year, following the midnight Christmas Eve service, Heller drove Dou and her mother home

because he was concerned about them being on isolated roads alone at night and because of the condition of the car they were driving.

So, some members of Bethel Lutheran went together and bought them a newer used car that was in good shape. The church folks thought nothing of the generous gift.

“Isn’t that what we’re supposed to do—love your neighbor?” Heller said.

“I’m not the greatest church pianist, but I like using my skills as a concert pianist to serve the Lord and his people.”

Dou and her mother have adapted to the Lutheran church in Ericksdahl, though they knew nothing about the denomination before taking the pianist job. Every two years, Bethel Lutheran hosts its famed smörgasbord, a culinary delight featuring authentic Swedish dishes. That, too, was a first for the Dous. They enjoyed the meal, helped with the dishes afterward, and Dou played the piano while others ate.

Dou calls her church position a “miracle.” She and her mother were short on funds when the offer came, the result of Heller’s wife contacting all the piano teachers in Abilene searching for the right person.

Both Dou and her mother are grateful and neither really wants to leave Abilene for Kansas or anywhere else. But if they do, expect them back someday and expect Dou to be back on the piano bench at Bethel Lutheran Church.

“I’m not the greatest church pianist,” Dou said, “but I like using my skills as a concert pianist to serve the Lord and his people.” ♪



Church expands, *continued from page A*

The Rev. Neil White (left) and Bishop Erik Gronberg attend the dedication as a new addition is built at Rejoice Lutheran Church, Frisco, Texas.



Congratulations!



Congratulations to the Rev. Joe Woodward, pastor of St. John Lutheran Church, Bartlett, Texas, who is now also serving as an Army Reserve chaplain.

