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Elisabeth von Trapp visits Rockingham County

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Mary Dolan

The halls were alive with the sound of music at Bethany Community Middle School this week.

Elisabeth von Trapp, daughter of one of the members of the von Trapp family of singers – made famous by the movie “The Sound of Music” – paid a visit to the local charter school Wednesday afternoon, regaling students with songs and stories of her family and her childhood. She performed a concert at the school later that evening.

The songstress treated students to some of her own music, as well as a couple of tunes made famous by the movie.

von Trapp 9

Elisabeth von Trapp, a member of the singing family made famous by the movie The Sound of Music, visited Bethany Community Middle School Wednesday afternoon, singing and speaking to the students about her childhood.

Elisabeth von Trapp is the daughter of Werner von Trapp, whose family provided the basis for the Broadway play and the film “The Sound of Music.” The story depicts the lives of a musical family living in German-occupied Austria, giving a glimpse into life in the days leading up to WWII, with that family ultimately making the decision to flee their home country.

The play was made into a movie, released in 1965, which starred Julie Andrews and Christopher Plummer.

It was no movie, but the reality of Elisabeth von Trapp’s presence before them on Wednesday, which left students spellbound.

Before von Trapp performed for the students, members of the school’s choir sang several pieces, including a rendition of “My Favorite Things,” one of the signature scores from the movie.

Leon Gentry, with the Bethany Community Middle School Foundation, praised the students afterward.

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“Y’all are great,” he said. “I think we may have to go on tour.”

Bethany alumna Rev. Donald Haynes, who befriended von Trapp several years ago when she was performing a concert in North Carolina, then introduced the woman he called a “dear friend.”

Von Trapp’s message, through her songs and her conversations with the children Wednesday afternoon was one of achieving aspirations.

“If there’s one thing I love, it’s talking about dreams coming true,” von Trapp said as she took the stage with her acoustic guitar in the school’s library.

Von Trapp fielded questions from the students, interspersed with the performing of several songs. In response to students’ inquiries, she spoke of her family’s struggles under the oppression of Dictator Adolf Hitler and the new life they created in the United States.

According to von Trapp, the premise of the movie about her family was fairly accurate, though Hollywood filmmakers took liberties bending the truth a bit, including its depiction of her grandfather, Capt. Georg Ritter von Trapp (he was not as strict as portrayed), the ages of the captain’s children (none were small children when they decided to leave the country) and the family’s departure from Austria (they didn’t depart in stealth through the countryside; they boarded a train for Italy.).

Von Trapp relayed the weightiness of the decision her grandfather made in declining Hitler’s invitation to join his army.

“You just didn’t do that at that time,” she said of saying no to the dictator.

But continuing to prove his military prowess was not something Capt. von Trapp wanted if it meant sacrificing his beliefs in what was right, his granddaughter said. Instead of the stiff, stuffy man portrayed by the film, von Trapp said her grandfather was kind, brilliant and multi-talented, with the ability to play the guitar, clarinet, cello and organ.

When the family, who had gained recognition for singing throughout Europe, made the decision to leave Austria under the guise of leaving for performances in Italy; they each took one bag as if simply going on vacation.

The von Trapp family ultimately settled in the United States after their departure from Europe, setting up residence in Stowe, Vermont.

Von Trapp recalled watching the movie with her parents after it was released.

“My mother’s eyes filled with tears,” she said of seeing the beautiful scenery of their home country.

The notoriety the movie brought her family was virtually instantaneous and somewhat overwhelming, von Trapp said.

“My parents were a big hit overnight,” she said, joking that suddenly they had lots of new friends.

“Where the movie ends is where life begins” is what von Trapp said her father told her, encouraging her to go after her dreams.

And as von Trapp first began listening to the soundtrack to “The Sound of Music” at 13, she said her dreams started to materialize. It was those songs from the movie about her beloved family that made her realize she wanted to pursue a life of music.

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“I realized I could listen to it forever,” she said.

Eighth-grader Lindsey Taylor, 13, is a member of Bethany’s chorus; she said she would love to pursue a career in music one day. She appreciated von Trapp’s visit and her words of encouragement.

“It’s very special to me as a person,” she said.

Von Trapp told the students she hoped something they learned during her visit that day would take root and “open up your future in a beautiful, beautiful way.”

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