



SISTER MIRIAM DAVID VOLKER
December 6, 1919 — January 5, 2007



“Small but mighty” - These are the words the Tribune Review used to describe Sister Miriam David in 1975, when announcing that she was the recipient of the Cultural Achievement Award that year. This was a prestigious award recognizing a person for significant contribution to the cultural life of the community. Prodded by violist Mr. Will MacCalla to establish a local symphony orchestra, Sister Miriam David held long conversations with Dr. Richard Karp, Seton Hill College faculty member and noted conductor, to envision how such an undertaking could be launched successfully. A few years of planning led to the go-ahead from Sister Miriam David. Mr. MacCalla recruited 50 eager musicians. The Women’s Auxiliary of Westmoreland Hospital sponsored the first performance as a benefit concert for the hospital. Dr. Karp conducted free-of-charge for the first year. And the Westmoreland Symphony Orchestra was born. As the Tribune Review put it at the time of the Cultural Achievement Award, “What was first considered a community group of amateurs has come of age.” The Westmoreland Symphony Orchestra attained the degree of excellence that Sister Miriam David hoped for from the beginning.

Sister Miriam David continued to nudge this fledgling project from the nest by helping to form the Women’s Committee, starting educational programs that connected the musicians with the area schools, creating the Westmoreland Music Camp with good friend and orchestra member Pat Bair, serving on the board of directors of the orchestra for its first seven years, and acting, as the Tribune put it, “as a catalyst between the musicians and the board of directors.”

Sister Miriam David was truly a community leader. Last evening at our vigil, Sister Mildred Corvi referred to the Westmoreland Symphony Orchestra as “the gem of Greensburg.” It is certainly a tribute to Sister Miriam David, her ability to dream, her persistence and her leadership.

What a mighty trumpet blast from such an unassuming, quiet, generous, kind and gracious woman whose name, Virginia Bertha, was first pronounced in a far away place - Gorumahisani, India - on December 6, 1919 by proud parents Henry Volker and Florence Schwarzwoelder Volker. Ginny was dedicated to the Lord in baptism on the same day she was born.

Ginny had loving parents who taught her to value and respect other people from a very young age. When Ginny was just one year old and living in India, her cousins in the states Margot and Leo, also quite young, sent her Christmas gifts. Ginny’s mother wrote a thank you letter to Margot and Leo as if it were written by Ginny herself. That letter still exists today. The ending of the letter reads, “I hope you had as nice a Christmas as I did. In the afternoon four little Indian children came to play with me... One was a little girl named Ku-Ku... I never played with anybody before, so I took all the toys away from her. Mother made me give them back to her, and after that I was more polite. With love, from Virginia.”

Ginny learned to share not only her Christmas gifts, but her parents as well. This time with her new brother Hank who was born three days after the family left India and arrived in New York. (How is that for timing!) The family grew by two more boys, George and David, after moving to Aspinwall, Pennsylvania where Ginny attended Saint Scholastica Elementary School and Saint Raphael High School.

Mr. Volker played the violin. Both parents must have loved music; they provided piano lessons for all four children. In the early 1930's, that was quite a sacrifice when there were growing children to feed.

Ginny became a Seton Hill College student in the fall of 1938, and entered the Sisters of Charity in the middle of her sophomore year. After earning her B.M. at Seton Hill and making temporary profession, Sister Miriam David taught piano in Altoona, Brookline and Oakmont. It was while she taught in Brookline that our Sister Alice Ruane first took piano lessons from Sister Miriam David, a time when Alice's vocation surfaced. Alice later asked Sister Miriam David to be her sponsor as a Sister of Charity.

1951 was the beginning of Sister Miriam David's 34 years of teaching at Seton Hill College. She earned a M.M. at Eastman School of Music and studied piano and theory under the famed Madame Nadia Boulanger at the Fontainebleau American School of the Arts in France. Sister Miriam David moved through the ranks at Seton Hill to become full professor and chaired the Music Department for eight years. She played with the symphony on occasion; she also played with her brother David and sister-in-law Mary in concerts and recitals in the Pittsburgh area.

Although Sister Miriam David enjoyed playing, teaching piano was her real joy. She inspired her students to achieve. She gave the gift of music to nurture their souls. She fostered my vocation, for which I am most grateful. And she built friendships with her students and colleagues that lasted far beyond those college years.

Retirement from the College wasn't retirement at all for Sister Miriam David and her dear friend Sister Isabelle. Gilbert Straub Plaza needed co-managers as it opened its doors in 1986. Together, Davie and Isabelle created a welcoming community among residents that to this day gives Gilbert Straub Plaza an unofficial five star rating among high rises in the area.

Sister Miriam David, our "small but mighty" one, whether you are Ginny, Aunt Ginny, Great Aunt Ginny, or Davie to us – we love you dearly. We thank you for the beauty of life that is shared. In our hearts, we set you free, like King David in our first reading, to play with abandon before the Lord. Praise him with the blast of the trumpet, with lyre and harp, with timbrel and dance, with strings and pipe, with resounding cymbals and yes with piano - and with all the company of heaven – for all eternity – Praise the Lord!

*Funeral Liturgy Reflection
Sister Edith Strong
January 9, 2007*

