



**BARBARA BERNARD**

## Jericho a place that welcomes all

ONE OF THE POPULAR topics for essay writing has always been "what I did on my summer vacation." If I were to write what I did this summer, it would take every page of this newspaper and then some. And, I could never limit it to just one day because this summer was filled with many wonderful days. If I did have to pick one day, though, it would be June 11 when 11-year-old Sophie Lawry organized a benefit concert at one of my favorite places, Jericho, in Holyoke.

The Bureau of Exceptional Children and Adults at Jericho has been important to me because, in a sense, I was in on it from the ground floor. My husband's best friend in Holyoke when he was a little boy was Billy Wagner. Billy had a younger brother, Robert, who became a priest in the Roman Catholic Diocese of Springfield. In fact, my husband and I attended his ordination.

Father Wagner was zealous about breaking down barriers which were

experienced by individuals with disabilities and their families. Over 50 years ago, Father Wagner began the organization which has served this area ever since with incredible help, resources, programs, spiritual support and information for those with disabilities.

Today, Sister of St. Joseph Joan Magnani carries on the mission of Father Wagner with a dedicated board of directors, countless volunteers and a spirit of inclusiveness which makes the many beautiful, peaceful acres of property a sanctuary for hundreds of families.

Because my husband and I were so blessed with healthy children, we tended to want to do what we could for those who did not have it as easy. When today I am hugged by a child with Down's Syndrome or a child with legs in braces offers to share his cookie with me or as I look at the patience, love and devotion parents of children with disabilities exhibit, is it any wonder that Jericho is so special in my heart and hearts of countless others like me?

Weekend Masses at Jericho are always special. A favorite Mass is the Sunday one at noon. On June 11, it was held at 11 a.m. in a massive tent with mammoth fans to keep worshippers comfortable. Every seat was taken with many volunteers making accommodations for those with walkers and canes. I was stunned by the outstanding music played by a young man, Franklin Nichols, who is blind. His

incredible music belies the fact that he plays by ear. It was Trinity Sunday, and the priest's homily was a delight.

Because Sophie's concert was scheduled for 1 in the afternoon, refreshments were served after Mass, and it gave many of us the opportunity to visit with new friends. The concert began on time. Sophie's grandmother, the late Bridget Boyle, was very close to Jericho, and she provided inspiration for Sophie's fund-raising concert.

Sophie never missed a beat. As she sang her solos, I wondered how miraculous it was that she can remember every single word and perform with not one flub. Some of her close friends joined with her with duets and show-stopping singing and dancing. Her many adult friends from the Dan Kane Singers, including Freddie Marion and Traci Minch, filled in with great selections.

It was the patriotic songs Sophie performed in honor of area service people which moved the audience. There was a group of EMTs who stood at attention as they were saluted and then each branch of the service was honored with the choruses of their service branch songs. Veterans were asked to stand when the service in which they fought was featured.

The beautiful surroundings and the sense of unity provided magic for the event in a very special place where everyone is welcome. At Jericho I know every child,

no matter their circumstances, is made to feel special with every possible opportunity for fun and learning. My greatest compassion is for the parents because this is a difficult challenge in life.

There must always be a worry that if the parent passes on, who will care for the child? The amazing network of information which Jericho has and counsels to all surely gives families a strong measure of security. The overall feeling of happiness, warmth, friendship, love and acceptance is so worth a visit to Jericho.

Everyone truly is welcome, and I would suggest that if some day you just need a spot to find peace and an opportunity to reflect on how good your life really is, you visit the Bureau of Exceptional Children with Jericho on Route 5 in Holyoke. You can learn more about the work they do on their website, [jerichobeca.org](http://jerichobeca.org).

*Barbara C. Bernard, of Holyoke, is a columnist for The Republican.*