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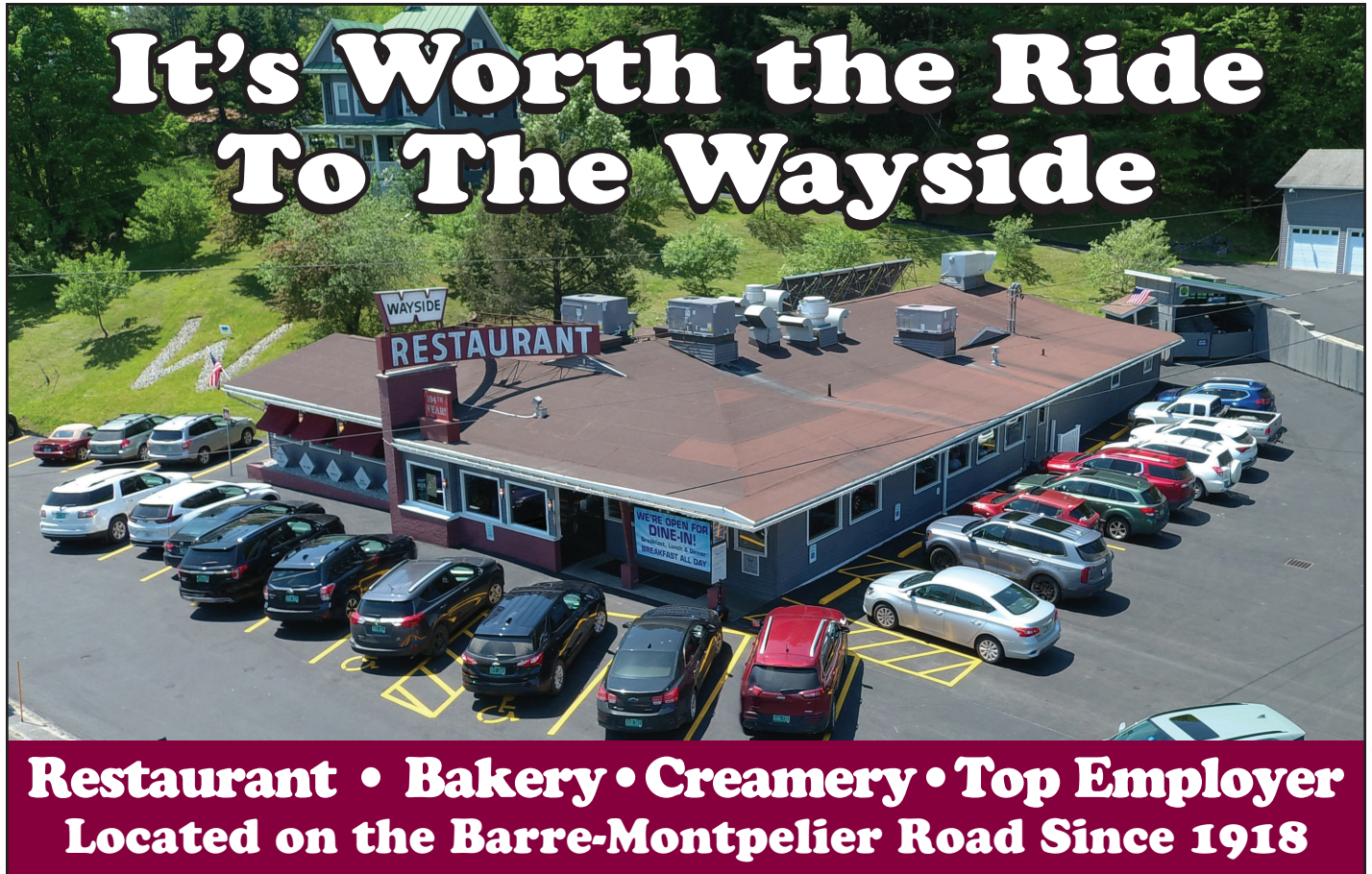


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A skier gets air while skiing some snowy
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PHOTOS BY PETER COBB

Becky Lovely, Zahra Dana an apprentice sculptor, and sculptor and owner Heather Milne Ritchie.

By Peter Cobb

Sculptors Heather Milne Ritchie, Becky Lovely and Ryan Mays, who create stone art at Mill Street Studio in Barre, would like holiday shoppers to know that in addition to the usual fare, there is another option: handmade, unique, stone-carved gifts.

“What makes these gifts special is they become part of your home. There

is history in the art. The gifts become conversation pieces. You share the art with the person you gave the gift to and they share it with their friends,” Ritchie said.

Ritchie, a professional granite memorial carver and artist in many mediums, has been selling small, low-relief carvings made from granite shards for nearly 20 years. Her heart carvings are especially appropriate for someone who wants to express love to a friend or family member,

or as recognition of loss of a loved one.

“They can represent love and loss. Some find them to be comforting gifts,” Ritchie said.

Ritchie has notable sculptures in Barre, including the unforgettable big wheel riders bike rack at the Barre pool, and “Lunch Break” outside City Place on North Main Street.

Sales are handled through her website, www.heathermilneritchie.com.



PHOTOS BY PETER COBB

Ryan Mays sits beside stone art at Mill Street Studio in Barre.

“When I buy gifts for people, I buy gifts that are handmade. Although the gift may cost a bit more, they have more meaning and they support local artists,” she said.

Mays agrees that supporting local artists makes sense.

“I guess I’m biased but I like local handmade things, whatever they are, for art and gifts. I think they can have a lot of meaning,” he said.

Mays creates sculpture for the home and garden, as well as monumental works for public and private projects. He specializes in high-quality representational sculpture in granite, limestone, marble and bronze.

Local readers may be familiar with his work, as he carved the statue of the mouse reading a book at Montpelier’s Kellogg-Hubbard Library main entrance, as well as a bronze owl on the grounds of the Vermont Institute of Natural Science in Woodstock.

Mays’ work is available at Artisans Hand Craft Gallery in Montpelier.

Lovely’s gifts are functional art.

“I like things that are functional so

right now I am focusing on kitchen items, cheese boards, mortar and pestle and so on. I make things that I would like to have in my house, things that are practical but also have a bit of art to them,” Lovely said.

Lovely will personalize items according to her customers’ preferences. She has been a stone artist since October 2023. She learned the trade as an apprentice to Ritchie. In her prior career, Lovely was a dental hygienist.

“Strangely enough, the skills Becky had as a dental hygienist are perfect for stone carving, patience and a steady hand,” Ritchie said.

To Lovely, the main draw for both her items, as well as for the gifts created by Ritchie and Mays, is that their items are unique and are gifts that last forever.

“Everything I make and everything Ryan and Heather make are one-of-a-kind art made with great care,” she said.

Lovely’s work can be seen on her Instagram page @thelovelycarver and can be purchased through Ritchie’s website.





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Sylvia Thompson of Zutano.



Alexis Wells of Forget Me Not.

LOCAL

Why we should SHOP LOCAL

By Peter Cobb

Planning to do some holiday shopping online? Consider downtown shopping instead.

Downtown shopping is fun and also helps support local businesses.

“Downtown Rutland offers beautiful scenery, incredible works of art, and shopping and dining in a historic, walkable downtown,” said Hal Issente, executive director of the Downtown Rutland Partnership. “There’s a book store and a toy store, clothing stores, numerous gift shops and great

restaurants. McNeil and Reedy is a perfect example of why downtown shopping makes sense. They’ve been making their customers happy for many, many years.”

McNeil & Reedy, a third-generation family-owned men’s store, which opened in 1956, has the largest selection of suits, sport coats and tuxedos in Vermont, as well as on-site tailors to ensure the best possible fit.

Tracie Lewis, executive director of the Barre Partnership, and Katie Trautz, executive director of Montpelier Alive, both agree.

“It’s important for shoppers to know how hard our business people work to make sure the shopper’s experience is positive. They work with you to assure that what you buy is what you want,” Lewis said.

Montpelier, America’s smallest state capital, has two book stores, a candy store, a Vermont crafts’ store, several gift and jewelry shops, coffee shops and numerous restaurants that offer a range of fare.

“Shopping local is the No. 1 way community members can support the downtown during the holiday season. Considering the immense challenges Montpelier has faced in the last decade, between COVID and the flood, dollars spent locally will be key to recovery,” Trautz said.

Most Vermont downtowns have special events planned for the holiday season, including tree lightings, Santa visits and hay rides.

Montpelier has Flannel Friday as well as Small Business Saturday, which includes horse-drawn wagon rides, a cocoa crawl and more.

“The Christmas season is especially busy in Montpelier. Christmas is a great time to experience our downtown,” said Claire Benedict, co-owner of Bear Pond Books.

Sylvia Thompson, owner of Zutano, a children’s clothing store in Montpelier, said community support for her store has been great.



Eric Bigglestone of Capitol Stationers.

PHOTOS BY PETER COBB



Claire Benedict of Bear Pond.



Tracie Lewis ED for Barre Partnership.

"I feel very lucky to have my store in downtown Montpelier. It's a special place where you build friendships with your customers and get to see their families grow up. With the support of other business owners and welcoming community, I can't imagine being anywhere else," she said.

On Dec. 12, Rutland is holding its Jingle Bell Shop, a holiday shopping and tasting event that brings downtown businesses together with beverage and food producers, artists and activities. Participants are encouraged to wear festive attire and ugly holiday sweaters.

Alexis Wells, owner of Forget Me Not gift shop in Barre, said her business, like all downtown businesses, depends on a loyal customer base. "If you want a vibrant downtown, you need to support the downtown businesses," Wells said.

Barre has had two floods in two years and, and like downtown businesses globally, the city saw a marked decline in business during the COVID lockdown. Despite difficult times, Barre shoppers have been very supportive, Wells said.

The holiday season is especially important to downtown businesses, according to Eric Bigglestone, co-owner of Capital Stationers, an office supply store and gift shop in Montpelier. Bigglestone estimates the Christmas season, which now includes all of November, comprises 30% to 40% of his business.

"No question, a good Christmas season is crucial," he said.

Capitol Stationers, which opened in 1950, is one of the oldest businesses in downtown Montpelier, celebrating 75 years next year.

According to Will Notte, store manager for Phoenix Books in Rutland, one important feature local book stores offer is a staff who love books.

"One of the reasons our customers

shop here is because of the expertise of our staff. They know books and they know what our customers like to read. They can guide the buyer to the books that best meet their needs. It's hard to match the in-person experience of a local bookstore," Notte said.

Cynthia Duprey, owner of Next Chapter Books in Barre, agrees.

"One of the advantages of shopping at a local book store is that I know who my customers are. I know which books they would enjoy reading and which books they probably wouldn't like. You don't get that from online shopping," she said.

Waterbury, like its southern neighbors Montpelier and Barre, also offers a variety of unique shops and boutiques perfect for an afternoon shopping excursion.

"Shopping Waterbury makes sense," said Sue Markley, a salesperson at Stowe Street Emporium. "It supports the local businesses and saves on gas."

The Emporium, which has been in business for 27 years, carries an eclectic variety of gifts and everyday merchandise.



Book Display and kids' tree house at Next Chapter.



Sylvia Thompson at Zutano



Product display at Forget Me Not



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Making a tradition around FINDING A TREE

By Peter Cobb

The best part of selling Christmas trees is the customers. That's what owners of local tree farms say. Jill Bruce, co-owner with her husband Shawn, of Bruce's Hillside Tree Farm in Barre, and Sue Sutton, co-owner with her husband Mark of Balsam Acres in Worcester are in consensus.

"We have families who come back here year after year. Some families meet their friends and their families here every year. People just love real Christmas trees," Sutton said.

Sutton gets to greet many of her customers twice each season as her farm has an early selection process where customers can select and mark their preferred tree as early as Oct. 30 and harvest it at their convenience. More than half of her customers choose early selection.

"We offer hand-sheared balsam Christmas trees in a variety of sizes. We also offer custom decorated wreaths," Sutton said.

Many of Bruce's buyers also are repeat customers.

"We've got families who've been coming here for many, many years, some for more than 20 years. We've seen their children grow up," Bruce said.



PHOTOS BY PETER COBB

Jamie Powers and Jill Bruce, co owners of Bruce's Hillside Tree Farm and Christmas gift shop.



PHOTOS BY PETER COBB

Above, Travis Martin cleaning the trees with leaf blower at Balsam Acres.

Bruce's daughter, Jamie Powers, an employee at the farm and also at their Vermont crafts gift shop, agreed.

"Some of the families who come here are second generation buyers," she said. The gift shop, which features all Vermont-made products, is open Fridays through Sundays, November and December.

The worst part for both farmers, at least for the past two seasons, has been the heavy summer rains that flooded Balsam Acres' two fields in 2023 and 2024, and dampened the soil so thoroughly at Bruce's Hillside Farm that 250 trees were lost over the past two years due to rotted roots.

"We didn't actually get flooded here, but there was so much standing water and the soil was so wet that we lost a lot of trees," Bruce said.

Even now, with very little rain for the past two months, some of the soil is still soaked, she said.

Balsam Acres, located in Worcester between Minister Brook to the south and the North Branch of the Winooski River to the east, was totally flooded each of the past two July rainstorms. The floodwaters nearly reached her house located at the entrance to the property along Route 12.

“We’re situated between a brook, a pond and a river, so we got flooded” Sutton said. “Some of the trees were totally covered with water and silt. This season was worse than last year. We lost 300 trees this July, compared to 150 in 2023. Hopefully next year won’t be a repeat of the past two years.”

The trees that survived, Sutton said, are in good shape, in great part due to the hard work of her farmhand, Travis Martin, who has spent many hours with a leaf blower cleaning the flood sludge off pine needles.

“We’ve been blowing the trees clear since the water receded in July. It’s been a lot of work,” Sutton said.

It takes four to 10 years (or more) for a Christmas tree to grow, with an average time of seven years. Bruce said her farm plants 200 to 500 trees a year. Sutton also plants several hundred new trees each year and had to plant more the past two years to replace the flood-damaged trees.

For both Bruce and Sutton, the weekend after Thanksgiving is when the tree-cutting season is in full swing.

“That’s certainly one of our biggest weekends,” Bruce said.

Both farmers are ready to meet their customers — especially the families they already know.

“Obviously, we depend on our loyal customers and we’re grateful they come back to us every season,” Sutton said.

According to the USDA Agriculture Census, there are approximately 3,600 acres of Christmas tree production in Vermont, with a crop worth more than \$2.6 million.



PHOTOS BY PETER COBB

Bruce's Hillside Tree Farm



PHOTO BY PETER COBB
Balsam Acres.

'MESSIAH'

is a performance tradition

By Steven Pappas

There are millions of people across the globe for whom G.F. Handel's "Messiah" is a holiday tradition. They listen with glee, especially looking forward to the famed "Hallelujah" chorus.

For many others, getting to that famed chorus starts a tradition every fall in preparation and rehearsal for performing Handel's best-known oratorio.

Courtney Gandee has sung soprano in the choir with Grace Congregational Church in Rutland.

"Every year I am so excited to just be a part of this rich musical tradition, with so many talented performers," she said recently.

Her introduction to the work came years ago.

"I attended a performance (of 'Messiah') prior to participating, and was so moved by the music, the soloists, and the professional instrumentalists, I was so excited to be a part the following year," she said recently. "'Messiah' marks a beautiful tradition of telling the story of Jesus' birth, with a rich history of performances over the years."

When Rip Jackson was directing, Gandee sang "Messiah" twice around 2012 and 2013 as part of the Rutland Area Chorus. After leaving Vermont and returning in 2020, Gandee rejoined the chorus in 2022, this time under the direction of

Alastair Stout. "Messiah" was back in her routine.

This work of music has had a lasting effect on Gandee.

"My grandmother passed away when I was in college. She was an alto, and was an organist for her Presbyterian church. Singing 'Messiah' every year helps me to feel close to her, and then I am carrying on a tradition that was so meaningful to her," she said.

It's not an easy work. Gandee explained there are technical challenges, including long, quick runs in certain movements. It requires a lot of drilling every year.

Mary Ashcroft sings in the alto section of the chorus.

"Years ago, I also helped feed the orchestra and soloists between performances," she said. Now, she plays a very active role.

"I started singing the Christmas 'Messiah' in 1982 and have sung continuously since (excluding 2020 when there were no concerts due to the pandemic). ... That's 42 years, counting this year."

Ashcroft had sung parts of 'Messiah' in glee club at Bellows Falls High School, and "loved the richness and challenge of the music."

"Every year the Rutland Herald had a photo of the annual Messiah performance in Rutland. I saw those photos, and thought that if I was ever over in the Rutland area and could make rehearsals, I'd give it a try," she said.



Ashcroft moved to Rutland in 1982, joining the Rutland Area Chorus to sing “Messiah” was one of the first things she did.

“The ‘Messiah’ concerts are a uniquely Rutland tradition. It’s the start of the Christmas season for many and an event to be shared with family and friends. I so enjoy the gathering of singers from many choirs and choruses. Differences in politics, in religion, in status all drop away as we meld back into a ‘Messiah’ chorus,” she said.

For Ashcroft, it has made her feel a part of the community. “It centers me, and gives me hope for the coming season and year,” she said.

It can be challenging to fit in rehearsals, and there is often a non-“Messiah” work to learn as well.

Ashcroft remembers fondly the scent of evergreens from the decorations welcoming choristers at Saturday dress rehearsal;

the gorgeous gowns of the women soloists; how each year her copy of the “Messiah” seems “a little more battered as I pull it out for the first rehearsal.”

Jay White has been performing “Messiah” in Rutland for 35 years in a row (minus the pandemic hiatus). He sings bass.

He said his fondness for choral music drew him to the piece. “To me ... it captures the spirit of Christmas,” he agreed.

Over the years, he has made new friends, and developed better vocal technique.

“The first year (under Director Alan Walker) it was magical to sing with a real orchestra,” he recalled “Attending and not performing in such a concert is enjoyable, but the experience is limited by a veil of formality, which is lifted by actual performance.”

White says he has no desire to stop singing “Messiah.” “I hope to participate for as long as I am able,” he said.



RUTLAND HERALD FILE PHOTOS
Grace Congregational Church rehearsals and performances of “Messiah.”

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Discover holiday spirit at
**VERMONT
COUNTRY STORE**

By Janelle Faignant

It's like Santa's Workshop year round at The Vermont Country Store, with its unique specialty items you can't find anywhere else. But during Christmas there are some top sellers.

If you can't make it to the Weston or Rockingham locations, the store's website has a Christmas tab at the top of the homepage. One click and you're in a Christmas wonderland.

"It's like a Christmas wish book online," said Eliot Orton.

Started in 1946 by Vrest and Mildred Orton, today The Vermont Country Store is owned by their son Lyman Orton and his sons Cabot, Gardner and Eliot — seventh- and eighth-generation Vermonters, and fourth- and fifth-generation storekeepers, respectively. Eliot Orton talked about some new items that they're really excited about this

COURTESY OF VERMONT COUNTRY STORE
Original Dresdner Stollen Tin.



year and some customer favorites each holiday.

To start, “We sell a lot of chocolate, a lot of food and a lot of liquor chocolate,” he said. “Fun holiday things that our customers really love.”

“We also do well with our flannel program — our flannel sheets, and our flannel sleepwear for men and women,” he said. Their flannel is made in Portugal, and Orton traveled there to work with the vendor in person and see how the flannel is made.

“It’s an amazing operation (and) what pride they take in producing the world’s best flannel,” he said.

You might think that a flannel shirt from Walmart isn’t much different from a Vermont Country Store flannel, but it really is.

“It’s all about the yarn, and how they weave that yarn and the type of cotton that they use,” Orton said. “There’s a long staple and a short staple cotton — long staple is more expensive, the way it’s woven, and it gives a more durable flannel. It wears better and it doesn’t pill, like a lot of flannel (does) after four washes.”

“We have to source that from Portugal, but we want a product that’s better for our customer,” Orton said. “We’ve been in business 78 years and we have to work hard every year to make sure that we continue to be successful. We can’t cut corners, and I think you can see that in the business.”

Another holiday favorite the store is known for is the ceramic Christmas trees.

“Our customers love our ceramics and it started with our noel angels, that classic Christmas decoration,” Orton said. “This year, our team developed a little snowflake Christmas figurine. It was inspired by a 1950s design and it really brings you back to that era.”

“I think that creates a bit of nostalgia but also creates a new tradition,” Orton said. “So that was developed because we have a great relationship with that manufacturer, and we brainstorm ideas with them and we listen to our customers and develop these things with a great deal of time. This is probably a year of work. And that’s really the process of developing a lot of the things that we sell.”

The popular Christmas Keepsake ornaments are made by the same company here in America that’s been making the official White House ornament for 40 years.

“They were able to make these ornaments and they’re exclusive to us,” Orton said. “We want to create an heirloom quality item that’s special for our customers.”

Also on the Christmas page under household items are the ever popular Mountain Weavers table linens, which are made nearby in Dorset with U.S.A.-grown cotton, “woven around the same 200-year-old looms,” Orton said.

“There’s just so many things, I could go on and on,” he said. “We have a whole European market with stollens and chocolates and the German pfeffernüsse cookies. They’re unusual and they really make the holidays special for our customers.”

“We sell about 5,000 items throughout the year,” Orton said. “That’s not a fraction of what you can find on Amazon but we’re not trying to sell everything. We’re trying to sell special things. We created this hand-picked assortment of products that you can create new and celebrate old traditions with them. If I sum it up, I think it’s all about helping our customers celebrate (those) traditions,” he said. “So that’s what we’re doing and we’re going to keep doing it.”



COURTESY OF VERMONT COUNTRY STORE

Above, Mountain Weave Christmas Cotton Tablecloth. Below, Santa Keepsake Ornament

THE SOUNDS OF ANGELS



Tintinnabula Grace Handbells

PHOTOGRAPH BY KRISTA JOHNSON

By SOPHIA BUCKLEY-CLEMENT

On a warmer-than-average Monday night in mid-November, all appeared quiet behind the double doors of Grace Congregational Church.

A peek inside yielded a sight of a gloved group of ringers and tens of shiny brass bells in all sizes.

“Why don’t we try this one moment on chimes?”

Tintinnabula handbell choir Director Alastair Stout said from behind his music stand. “Why don’t we try that? And then I’ll probably change it all back to normal.”

The group chuckles, raises their chimes and begins to rehearse.

Across the city on the Friday of that same week, Bells of Joy Director Karen James welcomes her choir to rehearsal with a lesson.

“I recalled a saying one of my piano teachers told me,” she said from the aisle of the city’s United Methodist Church. “Music is all tension and release.”

She raised an empty hand to mimic a ring, noting tension in her forearm as she follows the imaginary bell through the air toward her shoulder.

Once, then twice, then three times the group rang a chord,



Tintinnabula rehearsal.

PHOTOGRAPH BY SOPHIA BUCKLEY-CLEMENT



PHOTOGRAPH BY KAREN JAMES

United Methodist Church Bells of Joy Bells of Joy.

matching James' motion.

A smile crept in from the corner of her mouth, spreading to the ringers before her while the chord faded to silence.

--A vital sound

For some 30 and 40 years respectively, Tintinnabula and Bells of Joy have helped keep the sounds of bells alive and well in Rutland City.

Tintinnabula, taken from the ancient Roman word "Tintinnabulum," meaning an assemblage of bells, is home to 13 ringers and five octaves of bells and chimes that ring during

the months of September through May.

Stout shared the group frequently collaborates with the church's choir and serves as a great way to get those who may not be able to read music involved in playing.

James, whom Stout declared was "the queen of bells," said both her and Bells of Joy's handbell journey began in the late 1980s when the church was gifted a set.

"Bells didn't come to the United States until late 1960s or early 1970s, so we all had to learn together. So, (organizations) started to have conferences and we would all meet there



PHOTOGRAPH BY SOPHIA BUCKLEY-CLEMENT

Bells of Joy rehearsal



PHOTOGRAPH BY KAREN JAMES

Bells of Joy.



PHOTOGRAPH BY KRISTA JOHNSON

Jeannie Cushman.



PHOTOGRAPH BY SOPHIA BUCKLEY-CLEMENT

Fred Lemmons in front at Tintinnabula rehearsal.

and share ideas," James said. "I just got so involved with it because I love the instrument and how it's such a communal event. It's 10 to 15 people playing one instrument."

The group currently has 11 ringers, including James, and traditionally practices and performs during the fall, early winter and spring. James also operates a youth choir.

"It takes about 11 people to ring (our) three octaves, and we add the upper fourth octave. We just got a new ringer where we can add some low bass bells," James shared.

Both groups perform for traditional

worship services once a month, though non-secular music is also part of both organizations' repertoires — often played around the holidays.

The groups also typically collaborate for a performance in June, typically around Pentecost.

"We have an amazing talent pool of talent, not just here at Grace, but in Rutland," Stout said with a smile.

Stout shared that playing requires tuning into not only your notes, but how different melodies and sounds interact, your neighboring players and much more.

He added that as vital as the ministry is to the community, music is just as

meaningful to the ministry.

"It's a really, really important choir to get people involved in music," Stout said. "Bell ringing allows you to come into a choir with very little musical experience, and I think that is an absolutely fantastic tool to use in a church."

Sitting in the pews of each church, melting away to the tinny sounds sweeping the room, one may liken the music to what you might hear if you were to walk through a children's storybook.

But for Tintinnabula ringer Jeannie Cushman, who has been playing for over 35 years, there is a simpler answer.

"It's angel music."

--The love of ringing

For those who play in Rutland City's choirs, many attribute the longevity of both groups to the love of the craft.

Bells of Joy member Bobbie Filloe has been ringing since 1984 and shared that "love" is exactly why she has continued to play all these years.

"(Since the beginning,) it was something I looked forward to because I could relieve all the other stresses of whatever was going on in my life," she said. "There's a really strong connection among the group, and it's so uplifting when it goes well."

For fellow Bells of Joy ringer Ally Packard-Stoodley, the act of playing is healing and allows her to forget about the world around her.



PHOTOGRAPH BY KRISTA JOHNSON

Bass bells.

"I would liken it to yoga and people that meditate. We are honed in to make the pieces work," she said. "I have chronic pain right now and a lot of times (I have said,) 'I'm not gonna play much today' (and then I play) the all the pieces. ... It distracts you."

Lifelong musician and Tintinnabula ringer Fred Lemmons shared that listening, as well as playing, is a reflective experience.

"It's soothing," Lemmons said. "You can listen and think about other things, reflecting on what your life's about. It just helps you,"

With over 30 handbell choirs in the state alone, James noted that Vermont is very proud of its ringers and has traditionally hosted gatherings where players from all over the state join in ringing together.

"What's interesting is that it's called English handbell ringing, and there's far more handbells in the United States than there are in England," Stout said with a laugh.

He added that there are quite a number of handbell choirs across the county, if you know where to look.

"Anybody can ring a bell once they learn how handbells work," James said. "It's teaching music literacy to the people just starting to learn music. ... People just learn to love it — and the making of music."

Tintinnabula will play in Grace Church's Lessons in Carol service alongside the other choirs of the church on Dec. 15.

Bells of Joy will give its 41st annual Christmas concert at the Wallingford Town Hall beginning at 7 p.m. on Dec. 18.



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