

KAY CHURCH

- Max Delsignore: Hi folks, and welcome to another addition of the Northern New York Community Podcast. We begin today's story in Spragueville, New York, previously known as Sprague's Corners, it was once a bustling hamlet with two iron mines, a cheese factory, hotel, and a variety of stores. Today it is a sleepy, but proud community, towing the Jefferson and St. Lawrence County lines, with a population of just over 80 residents.
- Kay Church was raised in Spragueville, and she chose to care for her own family in the same community that made her. Kay is here and gracious enough to share her story about the triumphs and tribulations of her life, and how volunteering in the community has created the greatest and most meaningful joys.
- Before we visit with Kay, let's take a moment to thank our supporters for the podcast, WPBS and the Northern New York Community Foundation. They are responsible for the creation and production of these outstanding stories from the heart of our community.
- Be sure to check out what both organizations are doing these days. Head to www.wpbstv.org to see that latest from WPBS, and www.nnycf.org to learn more about the Community Foundation's recent work. Now, let's start our conversation with Kay Church. Kay, it's great to have you here. Thanks for coming on the podcast.
- Kay Church: Thank you for having me.
- Max Delsignore: To start, let's share a little bit about growing up in Spragueville, New York. What was the community like growing up there as a child?
- Kay Church: It was at least probably almost twice the size of what it is now. There were large families, and everybody knew their neighbors. Most mothers, wives, did not work outside of the home. We could always go to the neighbors just to hang out. I practically lived outdoors. I was a tomboy. It was just a wonderful place to grow up. It was peaceful. It was just a good place to be, to grow up.
- Max Delsignore: One of eight children in your family, right?
- Kay Church: One of eight children. I'm number five.
- Max Delsignore: What was it like having a family that size living in Spragueville, New York, and how did mom and dad oversee so many kids?

Kay Church: Right, and my grandmother lived with us also, so there was 11 in the house. It was good. It was really good. We had a church. We had the Methodist church we attended. My father and mother were pillars of the church. We didn't have a lot, but we had everything we needed. My father was a boy scout leader. PTA President, I believe, my mother was also at one time. Mom and dad were giving people to the community. Maybe not in money, but in other ways.

Max Delsignore: Can you share an example or two that you remember as a child of some of the things your mom and dad did to give back to folks in need?

Kay Church: Mom, before she became a nurse, would ... One lady especially would need her hair done, a perm. Couldn't afford to go to have her hair done, and mom would go do her hair. Something simple, but it needed to be done, and mom was very willing to do it. My father had to retire at age 53. He worked in the talc mines, and he had talcosis from working in the talc mines, and he had rheumatoid arthritis.

Even though he couldn't get out and do, he did from home. He was involved in a literacy program for adults that couldn't read, and I found out many years later that ... I met a young man at the college where I worked, and we got to talking about Gouverneur area, and he found out who my father was.

He said, "Because of your father, I was able to get a job in the mines. I couldn't read. He helped me. I couldn't have worked in the mines if I couldn't have filled out papers, and done certain things. With your father's help, I was able to get that job in the mines."

He also was a boy scout leader for years. He had approximately 18 boys in his troop. In such a small hamlet, it's not even a village, Spragueville, but a hamlet. Like I said, he was always giving, and mom was too. In just small ways, but in good ways.

Max Delsignore: What are some of the values of giving back that you learned from watching your parents lead by example?

Kay Church: The kindness to people. Giving back in some small way to make a difference, to make a difference in people's lives. They're not wanting charity, they just need help, whether it be ... just the small things and a visit.

My father, again, he was not able to work at age 53, and he would find out that there were people that are kind of down, and needed somebody to talk to, or just a listening ear, and he would call them, and he would talk with them, and listen. He didn't realize it, I don't think, but he was making a big difference by doing that.

Max Delsignore: You graduated from Gouverneur Central School, and married at the age of 19, and had three children, Michael, Kimberly, and Greg. How important has sharing

some of those values that you learned from your parents, how important has it been to share those same values with your children?

Kay Church:

My children learned at a young age because at a young age I was the only parent they had in their life. We had neighbors that gave of their time. They would take the kids for overnight. They would take them on vacation. They saw it at a young age, and I said to them, "Do you know how fortunate we are to live where we do? If we lived in New York City or a big city, and didn't have family and friends, how different our lives could be? We could be living on the street."

They saw it at a young age from watching others do for us. My son is involved with the Alzheimer's Walk. My daughter started a Clown Ministry out in Colorado after being here, and finding out, and seeing what we did with our Clown Ministry in Gouverneur.

My son Michael passed away almost 11 years ago at age 39. Even when he was sick with cancer, it was either a neighbor or a neighbor's family that needed somebody to talk to, and Michael listened because he was encouraging him. It doesn't matter how little money you have, there's always something you can do to make a difference in others life.

Max Delsignore:

Going through that tumultuous time, single parent home, finding a job to help sustain your family and your three kids, what did you learn the most about yourself going through that experience, and be on the receiving end of the generosity of others, but then when it was time, to also give back to others when you could?

Kay Church:

The expression it's more blessed to give than to receive, or it's easier to give than to receive is so true. I'm kind of drawing a blank right now, but one of the stories ... Can you remember one of the stories that I wanted to share?

Kay Church:

I got the job the same month in August of '79, that's Chaney Dining Center [SUNY Canton]. We were actually living below poverty level. I got to a point where my car that I had was not working, and I had to get a different car. I could not get a credit card because I was a seasonal worker, my income was so low, so I went to my Aunt Mabel and Uncle Mario Pistilacy, and I asked them if I could borrow the money, and the money I got for the car I would give them right away, and then when I would get my tax return, I would pay them.

This would probably take me quite some time, and they agreed upon that. I wanted to sign a contract, but they didn't want to do that, so no contract was signed. When I did get the money for the car, I gave it to them, the other car. When I got my first tax return back, I went to give it to them, and they wouldn't take it.

What they said to me was, "If someday you can do for somebody else, and make a difference in somebody else's life, that's payment enough." It was very special,

and they wouldn't take the money. I really wanted to give them the money, and they wouldn't take it. What a difference.

Max Delsignore:

In many ways, it seemed to be almost a tipping point in your life too where you began to really demonstrate giving back full force once you had that experience certainly happen, and you're taking care of your kids, and you were a devoted volunteer before, but it seemed as if your volunteerism increased then gradually at that point. Whether it was church, in the community, or elsewhere it was pretty easy to find you in the midst of trying to help.

If I remember correctly, it was the experience in taking care of your mother that introduced you to Hospice for the first time. What was that experience like in the latter part of those years taking care of your mother?

Kay Church:

Yes, mom passed away 24 years ago, but in late '93 we had Hospice. Such a wonderful organization. I can't say enough about it. What a difference they made that mom was able to go peacefully, and without the suffering, and without the pain, and be at home in her own house. We had requested volunteers, and in our area, the southern end of St. Lawrence County, and we had Hospice of Jefferson County at that time.

There weren't the volunteers that could come and they didn't have hardly any volunteers in the area to begin with, but there weren't the volunteers that could do the things that could do the things that we needed to have done. When mom passed away, I thought, "I want to give back." I had to wait a full year, and then I took the training. I've been a volunteer with Jefferson County.

I haven't recently for Jefferson County, but St. Lawrence County I've been a volunteer for approximately 18, 19 years. I can't tell you enough how beautiful it can be. That may sound say but it can be beautiful to be in there as a volunteer, and to make a difference in some small way in the last part of their journey. The Hospice patients have taught me how to live, and they're teaching me how to die. It's just such a special, special organization.

Max Delsignore:

A recent example too that we've talked about before, but people amending a music and memory program for some Hospice patients, and the Community Foundation's Youth Philanthropy Council Program or to grant to Hospice of St. Lawrence Valley to start a pilot for this.

When you heard about it, you started to actually deploy it with some of the folks that you were volunteering for and helping at Hospice. Can you share one of the best stories from that experience where music has really made a difference for some of those folks?

Kay Church:

I will. I first want to say that my husband was a patient. He had Alzheimer's at River Ledge Nursing Home in Ogdensburg. While there, I got to know the activity director and a lot of the people. Then after my husband passed, I

wanted to give back a small donation of money, and Larry said, "Instead of donating money, why don't you purchase an iPod and a speaker." I didn't even know what an iPod was, so he told me about it, showed me what it was because they had the Music and Memory Program there, but hadn't really gotten it off the ground, I don't think.

Then about the same time, Hospice of St. Lawrence County was going to start doing it, so it's been about a year and a half that I've been doing Music and Memory. One of the patients I have right now, she's in her early 90s. She is in a Geri Chair, a special chair where she is almost in a lying position at times. When I went to see her she was sleeping, and I said to the nurse manager, "Every time I go to see her she's sleeping, and I don't want to wake her up." She says, "Wake her up because she sleeps most of the time, and I'm so glad you told me that."

The first time I went to see her, I introduced myself. I asked her if she wanted to listen to some music. She said she did. She played the piano at her church, so I played hymns. I knew those would be something that she would really want to listen to. Her eyes were shut, and she was just there, sitting there. Once I turned the iPod on, and turned the speaker up so she could hear it, it was like she came alive.

Her hands started going like she was playing the piano. She started smiling. She started singing to the hymns even though she spoke very little, music brings back memories from the past, and that's what she was doing. She was remembering. She could remember all the words to the song. She would say to me, "Isn't that beautiful? Thank you. Thank you. Thank you."

Max Delsignore: That's amazing.

Kay Church: Truly amazing.

Max Delsignore: One thing I want to ask you too. We've talked about this a little bit, but it's another, I think, gesture of looking out for somebody else, but you give out a lot of hugs when you go to volunteer at Hospice don't you?

Kay Church: I do.

Max Delsignore: Why is that important to you?

Kay Church: Well, I do it for the person whomever I'm with. Not just for them, but for me. It's just a good feeling. I know what a good feeling it is to me to get a hug, a sincere hug from somebody, and so I try to ask first because not everybody is a hugger, so I try to ask first. I think it makes them feel good. I know it makes me feel good, and it's just an act of kindness, an act of caring, of letting them know that you do care.

Max Delsignore: Switching gears to something that you're very passionate about and volunteer for. You mentioned this earlier about your daughter doing this, but the Clown Ministry, for somebody who's wondering what that is, tell me a little bit about the genesis of that, where the idea came from.

Kay Church: In 2010, I was volunteering at Gouverneur Nursing Home as a Hospice volunteer, and it was late November. One of the patients that I got to know, she wasn't a Hospice patient, but I got to know, the resident, seemed kind of down, and so did some of the other residents. I thought, "We've got to do something. There's something we can do about this." My sister, Linda and my mother used to play violin, piano at Gouverneur Nursing Home when my mom was alive, and my sister had talked about going back and doing it again, but she hadn't done it.

My friend, Carol, and I had talked about starting a Clown Ministry through our church, but we hadn't done anything about it, so I called Linda, and I called Carol, and I said, "What do you think?" They both knew this patient, and they said, "Sure, let's do it." I called the activity director, and I told her what we wanted to do, and she wanted to know the name of the group, and I said, "I don't know. We don't have a name. We haven't done this before."

Originally we were called Linda and the Clowns, and then we started having people come and be a part of our company and sit with the patients, the residents, and talk to them, and sing with them, and so then we became Happy Linda and the Joy Clowns. Then later on, my sister's pastor joined us, and another sister became a Clown, my sister, Connie, so we became the Joy Clowns and Company.

One of the very first times we did the Clown act at the Gouverneur Nursing Home, one of my Hospice patients, they brought her out. Again, she was in the Geri Chair, she had advanced Alzheimer's. She couldn't move her body, just her eyes, at least that's all I ever saw when I was with her. When the music started playing, my sister plays fiddle music plus regular violin. She started playing a Country and Western tune.

I looked over at my Hospice patient, and her foot was going ever so slightly in time to the music. I didn't think she could move any part of her body except to move her eyes, so she was there. She came alive in a small way. It brought back memories. It was beautiful to see. We do Clowning at Canton Maplewood Nursing Home the third Monday of each month, and River Ledge Nursing Home the second Monday of each month.

The reason we stopped going to Gouverneur, again is that that nursing home closed, and we wanted to reach out and continue our ministry as beautiful. I don't know who gets more out of it, the residents or those of us that go to be a part of the Clown Ministry. That's beautiful. I leave the nursing homes doing the Clowning on a natural high, and also when I do my Hospice volunteering especially with the Music and Memory because it's made such a huge difference.

I've seen it with people I hadn't met before that were actively dying that would ask me to come and sit with a patient. They were not talking, but they can hear. I was taught that the hearing is the last to go, when I did the training to become a Hospice volunteer, and so I put the music on. I've had at least three patients benefit from this. One lady especially whom I had been seeing, the last time I saw her I planned on staying a half an hour, I ended up staying for three hours.

They were waiting to hear from Hospice to give her medication. She was very agitated, and in pain, and having a hard time. I knew what music she liked, and I sat down, and once I started playing that music, this lady, who was in pain, you could see it in her face, this lady, this patient calmed right down. This is without medication. She was peaceful, and she listened to the music. I couldn't leave her. I stayed for three hours. I just didn't want to leave her.

Max Delsignore: Made such a difference.

Kay Church: It made such a difference.

Max Delsignore: You've been doing this, Kay, connecting with so many of these folks in need, and not just through Hospice or Clown Ministry, Alzheimer's Association, Volunteer Transportation Center. If we looked at your calendar it would appear as if you're still working full-time. You probably work more than some folks do full-time, or volunteer.

What has it meant to you to really just keep filling up these days? You've been retired for a period of years now. What is it like knowing that you're filling these days volunteering and helping others?

Kay Church: It's such a wonderful feeling to be able to give back in some small way. I can't tell you how much I get out of it. It's just such a joy, whether it's a patient that's actively dying, that might sound strange, but to be able to be there, and be with them, and to make a difference.

Max Delsignore: You mentioned a minute ago about volunteering being a natural high.

Kay Church: Yes.

Max Delsignore: You kind of answered the question just now, but if you could elaborate a little more on that natural high. What's that feeling that you get when you go and you're done helping somebody every day?

Kay Church: I've forgotten all of the aches and pains I might have had, any of my concerns before I went to do the Music and Memory or the Clown Ministry. I just feel so good that I was able to make a difference in some small way, and to see that joy and the happiness. You know, clowns originally came to be to bring joy and happiness to people. That's what they were meant to be. That's what they were meant to do.

I want to share with you one of the ladies from the nursing home in Ogdensburg. I'm going to say her name because she is now related through my son. Her name was Elizabeth [Stoll 00:24:43]. She was at Gouverneur Nursing Home to begin with. When we started the Clown Ministry I'd never met her before. She was amazing. She's in a wheelchair, and I dance with the residents from the wheelchairs, and I was dancing with her from a wheelchair, and she wanted to stop.

We have this big circle with people in their chairs, and she stopped every person. She wanted to say, "Hi," and talk to them a little bit, but yet she wanted to dance too. Then when Gouverneur Nursing Home closed, she went to Ogdensburg, and entered a unit.

It's like she was an ambassador for goodwill. She did the same thing. People just loved her. She made a difference even though she was in a nursing home and wheelchair, was not able to do most things for herself. She was making a difference.

Max Delsignore: One of the things that you've had a chance in your travels and volunteering, I'm sure you've had the opportunity to interact with some students or some youth that might be volunteering a little bit as well with you.

One of the things we've discussed a lot in this podcast is the next generation, and their active involvement in giving back to the community, especially volunteers because I feel like that's a really hard area sometimes for youth and young professionals to really figure out how they can help by volunteering. What message would you share for the next generation to encourage them to give back the way that you have?

Kay Church: You know, we all have journeys to go on, and in giving, you receive. I think most everybody at one time or another in their life, whether it be financially, health wise, in some way will have a need in their lifetime, and if my children, my grandchildren can share with others and make that difference by just a listening ear, in some small way, I keep saying that, but I can't say it enough, then they're making a difference to mankind.

Max Delsignore: How important is volunteering, whether it's for an organization, your church in your community, how is that important volunteering to the future of where we live here in Northern New York, or the spirit of volunteering, how that important that is to these communities where we live?

Kay Church: There's a special bonding. There's a special bonding when you're doing the volunteering, whether it's people that I don't have a lot of money to give. I give when I can, but for those that's wonderful that people, through their generosity of money can give. That's wonderful because if they didn't have money to give, we would have to leave a sad society, I think, today.

I think about my sister, Linda, who is a volunteer at the food pantry in Gouverneur. She once shared with me. She said, "You know," she said, "people think that people that come to the food pantry come because of their low income," but she said, "you know that there are people that because of all the monies they have to pay out for prescriptions a month do not have the money to take care of the rest of their needs."

I guess I'm kind of ... but I wanted to share that. Everybody, everybody, it doesn't matter your ability, disability, lack of money, or money can give. There isn't a person that can't give. I talked about this lady in the nursing home, and there she was bringing joy to others through her caring and talking.

Max Delsignore: Everybody has a talent or ability to do it ...

Kay Church: Everybody.

Max Delsignore: ... regardless of age.

Kay Church: Everybody has a talent.

Max Delsignore: Okay, I hope our listeners, and those you've have had the ability to connect with personally understand how fulfilling life can be when you volunteer to help others. We really appreciate you sharing your experience with us, and the lessons that we hope will impact many others forever.

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