

She marks her 93rd birthday with a song

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In Print: Wednesday, May 7, 2008

Ethel Nalepa sings karaoke while her granddaughter, Melanie MacPherson, 45, of Niskayuna, N.Y., listens during Nalepa's 93rd birthday party Monday afternoon at Hernando-Pasco Hospice in Spring Hill. Nalepa planned her own party, which included professional entertainers.



SPRING HILL — While a lot of seniors were contemplating their midafternoon naps Monday, the septuagenarians to nonagenarians at Hernando-Pasco Hospice's Hernando Lodge were whooping it up with music and a party.

It marked the 93rd birthday of Ethel Nalepa, who, in just three months as a resident, has turned on the other nine guests to the glee of singing.

She hired entertainment entrepreneur Dennis Boff, who operates sound and taped musical scores, and vocalist Tommy Russo and his wife, Pat, all of Spring Hill, to set the stage for karaoke. The pros arrived dressed for an elegant affair: white-jacketed tuxedos, ties aglitter with silver, Pat in classy black and white as well, all designed to create a heady atmosphere.

Ethel, with a halo of white curls, wore a black embroidered white dress under a black sweater emblazoned with sequined white doves and red ribbons. She knows the importance of a performer's attire.

The longtime leader of the 29-member Sun and Fun Kitchen Band in Zephyrhills, Ethel owns 17 trophies, from the Plant City Strawberry Festival and the Florida State Fair, to attest to her musical expertise and attention to presentation details. That group was mainly vocal, with some piano accompaniment, she said. Interjected her son, Robert of Sugarmill Woods, on hand for the party, "Some of them beat on a pot." Huffed his mother, "Oh, no, we didn't."

At 93, Ethel is still up to huffing. Jane Freeman of Hernando-Pasco Hospice describes her as "all pizzazz, full of energy, conversation and laughter." Ethel is channeling energy now into big plans by Lodge residents for July 4th.

"We're taking our wheelchairs and walkers and going through the halls (at adjacent Evergreen Atria Woods) singing *God Bless America* and other patriotic songs. I thought that up. I thought we should stand behind our country."

Just as she did with her Zephyrhills performers, she's going to insist the Lodge residents learn the lyrics, no reading allowed. Of course she'll command that they practice singing before the event. On Monday, Ethel led her own party, microphone in hand, in a rousing chorus of *Happy Birthday*. The vocal chorus was also directed at resident Kitty Torebka, who turned 90 on Sunday. As the music cranked up, Ethel's hands weaved like a choirmaster's, her knees pumped and her feet tapped. Smiles broke on the faces of residents, even those breathing oxygen, and on the caregivers. There were some moist eyes in the house at the emotion stirred by song. Nurse's aide Gina Heredia cajoled a resident into dancing with her.

Said Ethel of her lifetime with singing, "As a little girl, we had a player piano. I'd just sit and sing. It was just in me. As a 2-year-old, I got up and sang *Jesus Loves Me* in church." Her son, Robert, recalled that he'd heard that even then, listeners said she should have gone on stage. Soprano? Alto? "I don't know," answered Ethel. "I just sing."

Also joining in were her granddaughter, Melanie McPherson, who traveled from Niskayuna, N.Y., for the celebration; in-laws Jim and Mary Cassidy of Belleview; and Torebka's daughter, Maryanne Kouba of Brooksville.

The karaoke crew burst into the Lodge's theme song, which Ethel had adopted and taught them, ending with these lyrics:

"We don't know what's coming tomorrow. We'll share alongside, just as long as we're together, singing a song, side by side."

Ethel's secret for longevity, she said: "Just be happy, enjoy life and sing."

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[Last modified: May 08, 2008 04:18 PM]