

# Burlington Free Press

## Von Trapp's music soothes on ravaged streets

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By Brent Hallenbeck / Free Press Staff Writer

Elisabeth von Trapp spent a day last month volunteering at a tent in Pass Christian, Miss., helping to dispense clothing to hundreds of hurricane victims. She said it was mostly women who passed through the tent, searching for pants or shoes for husbands and grandchildren.

Von Trapp asked many of the women what they needed for themselves. More often than not, she said, they broke down crying, telling her something like "I can't really think of myself, I have to think of my family."

She had to dig deeper to get the women to tell her their personal needs. Usually, von Trapp said, they left with something for themselves as well as their family members.

"It was a long day," she said, "but it was an amazing day."

While in the Gulf Coast region, von Trapp also used her strongest asset -- her singing voice -- at concerts to help raise money for hurricane relief. Now that she's back in her home state, von Trapp will again turn to song to help those whose lives were left in shambles by Hurricane Katrina. She'll perform Friday at the Cathedral Church of St. Paul in Burlington, with proceeds to benefit the Episcopal Relief and Development organization.

Von Trapp, of course, has her own family history of difficult times. Her grandmother, Baroness Maria von Trapp, fled Austria with her family as the Nazis were taking over in 1938, a story famously documented in "The Sound of Music." The family settled in Vermont, and von Trapp is a professional singer who lives in Waitsfield with her husband, Ed Hall.

Von Trapp and Hall were heading to Georgia and Florida for shows in mid-October and were scheduled for concerts more than a week later in Virginia. They considered a vacation to fill the gap, but instead decided to help out along the Gulf Coast.

Hall said it took a day and a half to drive to Georgia, and by the time they arrived he and von Trapp had arranged for benefit concerts in Virginia, Louisiana and Mississippi. Hall said they told organizers in each community to "fill up a room with people, and Elisabeth will fill it with music."

What they found upon arriving at the Gulf Coast, according to Hall, was "utter, utter, total devastation," 100 miles across and more than 10 miles inland. Trees were down everywhere; those left standing bore strange fruit -- bed sheets, clothing, water heaters. Boats landed on the roofs of homes.

"It made you just stop in your tracks," von Trapp said.

While von Trapp worked in the clothing tent, Hall helped homeowners clean up debris board by board, tree limb by tree limb, shovelful of mud by shovelful of mud.

"Imagine having zero, nothing at all. What do you need first?" Hall said. There were few options for homeowners to replace what they had lost, Hall said, as most grocery stores and hardware stores in the region had been destroyed.

There were heartening moments, though, especially in Moss Point, Miss., which Burlington adopted as its sister city after Hurricane Katrina struck. Vermonters had sent down clothing as well as pumpkins for Moss Point's annual fall festival before Hall and von Trapp arrived.

"In Moss Point, if you're driving around with a Vermont license tag, people honk," Hall said. "It meant a lot to them, and they came up and told us."

One thing he and von Trapp could bring Gulf Coast residents was a sense of normalcy, by gathering in a community hall to hear music. The three Gulf Coast shows served different groups affected by the hurricane; the show in Moss Point was performed mostly before victims of the hurricane; a performance in Long Beach, Miss., was primarily for volunteers helping those devastated by Katrina; the concert in Covington, La., was largely attended by residents who were not greatly affected by the hurricane but wanted to help neighbors who were. Von Trapp performed for free at all of the shows, and each raised money for hurricane relief.

"People were wanting to be comforted," von Trapp said. "They wanted music that was so nurturing."

Von Trapp, whose sound merges classical, folk and pop music, was not at her best for the shows. She contracted acute laryngitis from the mold that was everywhere as a result of the saturating storm. At times she recited rather than sang songs such as her musical rendition of the Robert Frost poem "The Road Not Taken."

In a small way, by losing her voice as a result of Katrina, von Trapp shared a sense of loss with residents of the Gulf Coast.

"A lot of people lost everything," von Trapp said. "I was thinking, 'My throat will heal.'"