

Celtic Inspiration

Harpist dedicates CD to the Irishman who gave her a Celtic harp

By Amanda Dyslin
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MANKATO — All the magic, luck and repose a harp is said to have brought to the Irish since the 8th century has crossed the Atlantic and found its way to local harpist Amy Kortuem, with a little help from Mankato Irishman Jack McGowan.

Kortuem has played the harp at festivals, fund-raisers and weddings for more than a decade, growing more accomplished with every strum of the strings. And as each year has passed, Kortuem has become more grateful to the man she says made it happen.

"Jack was always such an inspiration to me in every imaginable way," Kortuem said. "And then he gave me this gift - this beautiful gift of my first harp - and it fit just right.

"Jack somehow knew that a harp was exactly what I needed."

Unable to express her love and gratitude of McGowan in words, Kortuem has done so in music on her second CD, "The Harp Her Soul Required." The recording is Irish music, ranging from jigs to airs, played on the Celtic harp that McGowan bought for her 15 years ago.

"I just wanted to give something back to him," Kortuem said.

Kortuem met McGowan when she was a student in his church youth group. She soon discovered McGowan's boisterous personality and love of life through all kinds of adventurous antics, such as making bell chimes out of empty oxygen tanks and camping on snowbanks in his front yard. They have been good friends since.

"It was no surprise one Sunday morning in 1988 when Jack called me and said he had something he had to show me," Kortuem said. "With Jack, it could have been anything. But I have to say I was shocked when I found out he had drug me out of bed to go on a camel ride at the Renaissance Festival.

"There I was, this college student lurching around the ring on this camel just fuming that I had agreed to this," she said. "But I'm so lucky that I did because that's the day Jack bought the harp."

Completely in his element, surrounded by colorful 16th century characters juggling, hollering and entertaining all around, McGowan's eye was caught by a small wooden instrument that symbolized his Irish culture and heritage - a walnut Woodsong Fleurette 33-string harp.

"I'd always wanted to learn to play, and when Amy sat down behind it, she fell in love, so I bought it for the two of us that day to learn to play," McGowan said. "We were supposed to switch off every week, but it didn't take long to figure out my turn never came. She enjoyed it so much, I told her to keep it."

Kortuem, never having played the harp, taught herself with a



Pat Christman

Amy Kortuem dedicated her second CD, "The Harp Her Soul Required," to longtime friend Jack McGowan who bought her the harp on which she learned to play. The recording is of traditional Irish harp music accompanied by Sena Thompson on the violin and viola and Martha Lindberg on recorders.

beginner's folk harp book before taking lessons. Her first public performance was at church - with McGowan in the audience.

"I wasn't nervous at all, really, because I loved playing so much," Kortuem said.

"And she did so beautifully," McGowan said. "I was so proud of her that day."

McGowan said throughout the years Kortuem continued to improve dramatically, from winning the Mankato State University talent show to playing professionally at dozens of weddings each year. But nothing, he said, could have prepared him for the day she played him the CD she had dedicated to him.

"For two years she had worked on it, and I never heard a word about it until that day," McGowan said. "Hearing the music meant so much, it was just wonderful.

"I'm so glad the harp has meant so much to her," he said. "Every once in a while you give a kid what you think they need, and it makes a difference."

Kortuem now owns two Celtic harps and one Lyon and Healy concert harp. She said she keeps busy all year playing them at area events. But no matter how much she plays, she says her love for the harp will never die.

"There's a certain chord progression that hits a nerve and creates a mood and truly resonates with me, and I know that will always be there," Kortuem said. "I want Jack to know how grateful I am for that feeling."