

Orangeville bell ringers are bound for Minneapolis

By Mike Pickford

A pair of local bell ringers will be flying down to Minneapolis, Minnesota this weekend to participate in a unique world record attempt at the Mall of America.

Shirley Jemmett and Barbara Peaker have long held a passion for bell ringing. The duo makes up a significant part of the Bells of Westminster – an ensemble based at Orangeville's Westminster United Church that plays at numerous events and conventions across the community on an annual basis.

Earlier this year, the Bells of Westminster were invited to attend The Big Ring in Minneapolis. Hosted by the Handbell Musicians of America, in collaboration with the Salvation Army and Mall of America, the association was hoping to attract 700 handbell players from across the continent to try to break the world record for most handbell performers playing in one location.

“As soon as we heard, we knew instantly that we had to go,” Jemmett said. “It's an incredible opportunity for this . . . I've been the Director at the Bells of Westminster for 21 years and nothing like this has ever happened before, so we were excited to be able to accept the invitation and register for the event.”

“The biggest event I've ever been a part of before was with the Ontario Guild of Handbell Ringers,” Peaker added. “They hold a biennial festival every couple of years, but even with that there's maybe 350 ringers at most at the event. To be playing as part of a 700-person choir is going to be quite the experience.”

Jemmett and Peaker will travel to Minneapolis tomorrow (Friday) with The Big Ring taking place the next day. The duo said they would have loved to see more of the choir's 10-person team join them at the world record attempt, but a combination of receiving the invitation late, travel expenses and uncooperative work schedules meant they were the only two able to make the trip.

The 700-strong choir will perform two pieces at the performance – Carol of the Bells and Silver Bells.

“These pieces were specially commissioned for The Big Ring, so it's going to be a really good opportunity for us to perform down there, I'm really looking forward to it,” Peaker told the Citizen.

Both Jemmett and Peaker are seasoned handbell players with years of experience both playing and directing programs within the local community. As well as acting as assistant director at the Bells of Westminster, Peaker is the Director of the bell choir in Alliston and also helps to lead a children's choir in Orangeville. They're hoping to see more people get involved with the local bell choir.

“The bell is a unique instrument. It's not something that you hear every day,” Peaker said. “It's not like a band or a singing choir – it really takes a whole team of people to make performing possible. If you're missing one singer in a singing choir, that's fine, but if you're missing a ringer in a bell choir you're specifically taking away notes that can no longer be used. It's almost the ultimate team sport.”

“And it's not particularly difficult to learn,” she added. “We're able to start people right away, even if they don't have any prior music experience. As long as you know your ABCs and can count to four, that's all we need.”

“We're definitely hoping to drum up some interest in the local area,” Jemmett commented. “We have a great group of players right now, but it would be nice to have a few more. This is something that husbands and wives, children and grandkids can all do together. The instruments themselves are very user-friendly and to top it all off, it's great fun.”

The Bells of Westminster meet at Westminster United Church every Tuesday from 7:30 to 9 p.m.