

## March 1992 - Reverend Nathalie LaCroix Forrest

The *Autoharp Clearinghouse* takes extreme pleasure in dedicating this issue to **Reverend Nathalie LaCroix Forrest**. In addition to being a minister, Nathalie is an autoharpist, folk singer and reader of poetry. Enjoy now her story:

“Thank you for wanting to know about me and the love of my life--my autoharp. This journey called life took a strange turn for me in the year 1972. I say strange because, before that year, I was working a nine-to-five job with which I was not happy. It was a position at an insurance company where I was a claims examiner for Medicare. I had been having trouble with my back for some time but, soon after I took that job, I began having problems with my knees as well. Things went from bad to worse over the next five years until I got to the point where I could hardly walk. This condition was aggravated by my having a sedentary job. I ended up having lower back surgery in 1972, followed by knee surgery a year later. At that time, I was also diagnosed as having severe arthritis, along with some other serious problems. My spirits were at an all-time low when my best friend came to visit one day carrying a strange looking musical instrument that she called an autoharp. I had never seen or heard of one in my life. She put it in my lap. I took one strum across the strings and asked her to leave this marvelous instrument with me that I might see what I could do with it.

That was the beginning of my love for the instrument and, to this day, the feeling is the same. Because I was recuperating, there was a lot of time for me to see what could be done with this most wonderful and melodious instrument. And, since I had never heard anyone else play one, it seemed that some inner spirit guided me and taught me to play. Also, after coming home from the hospital, I discovered that my high soprano singing voice had become very, very low. This scared me so badly that I was afraid to even hum. As time went on, the strumming of the instrument got better and this new found singing voice now had something to accompany it. I then could see that I had received a double gift--the autoharp **and** the voice.

There has always been a love of music for me. Having been raised in a foster home all of my young life, I was given piano lessons as a child. It probably would not have made any difference in my musical skills because music is second nature to me. The piano lessons helped me to create the sound and the chord progressions that seem to be unique to me. People who hear me play say that that is my trademark. I focus on blending major and minor chords along with the seventh and diminished chords, and I like to say that I truly march to the beat of a different drummer.

Musically speaking, there is a major problem for me here in Los Angeles in that I seem to live in the wrong neck of the woods. After all, this is the Rock and Roll capital of the United States. Here I am, a 63 year old disabled grandmother playing an autoharp. On top of that, even though I am a woman of color, I am not even a gospel singer. My roots are so variegated that it is difficult to categorize me. Some of my heritage is found on Long Island, New York among the Native Americans known as Indians. I also possess some Irish, Scotch, Madagascan and African blood. People look at me, seeing only the outside, and see only a Black woman. This is where they make their mistake in trying to say who I am. As for being discriminated against, it has not

been so much from Caucasian people as it has been from Black people. Evidently I do not project the preferred Black attitude (whatever that is), so playing an autoharp and singing folk songs puts me in a strange position. Even so, I will continue to do as I have been doing and, for those who have a problem accepting me, it is truly **their** problem

It is interesting to watch people as I am performing. Eyes pop and mouths drop open because it is hard to believe that the voice is coming out of me. Actually, it is not **my** voice; it seems to be something spiritual. There is no need to try to figure it out--one should just enjoy!

I am aware of the fact that there are people in the Los Angeles area playing the autoharp. But they live more in the suburbs and, since I do not drive, they are too far away for me to get together with them. On occasion, I have been taken to some folk music jam sessions, but they seem to have a different repertoire than I do. Although I like to sing songs from my childhood, my specialty is doing spirituals. Also, I like to write songs. When people say they are singing and playing 'traditional songs,' my question is **whose tradition???**

Lately, I have not been performing as much because I am very busy with my religious work, plus I teach one day a week at a nearby private school. In the past, I have entertained at the Claremont Folk Festival, but I did not attend in 1991 because it is just too much for me to handle anymore. For me, it is more rewarding to be working with young minds and hearts. The grades I teach are K through 6. My subjects are spelling, geography, music and, even though it is not a religious school, I manage to sneak in the Golden Rule. At one time, I had a class at a senior citizen's club but, sometimes when people get older, they seem to not want to learn anything and I got complaints that the class was too difficult. The truth is that television has taken over some people's lives and they become content to sit and stare at it from morning until night. It's too bad because I, for one, firmly believe that our senior citizens can still lead productive lives if they would only keep a positive attitude.

The children are a different story. If you make it interesting enough, they are eager to learn. We have word games, football quizzes, imagination time and storytelling time. They love for me to tell them stories because I use my autoharp and my voice to add sound effects. Once I was reading a story to my grandson and, when his father tried to read him the same story without the sound effects, he told his father, 'that is not the way that story goes.'

My religious life is a beautiful one. I was ordained in May of 1986 in the Free Anglican Church in America. I received my Doctor of Divinity a few months ago. While I am not in a church at the present time, I do work under the auspices of a Bishop. At one time, I served as Assistant Pastor for two years. However, being a woman minister is not the easiest job in the work because some people do not accept you and can give you a hard time. I had to ask my Bishop to release me from that position because it was too difficult to serve there. Never the less, I now teach on a one-to-one basis (Religious Philosophy) in my home, and I do much Pastoral Counseling. There are also other services that I perform such as blessing homes and families, anointing the sick and baptizing babies. All of these things can be done in the home, hospital or extended care facility.

Life for me is a wonderful journey. Even if I fall down, the getting up is rewarding. I am the mother of two grown children, Sydney and Bernice. Sydney lives in Grover City, California and

Bernice resides in St. Louis, Missouri. Bernice has two boys, and her husband, Alfred J. Guillaume, Jr., is the Academic Vice President of the Frost Campus at St. Louis University. Bernice is an Associate professor of History at the same campus. While in Rhode Island in 1974 attending Brown University, Bernice found some poetry and other writings by my grandmother. This started her on a search of our family's roots. In 1991, Bernice published a book of all my grandmother's works entitled *The Collected Works of Olivia Ward Bush-Banks*, compiled and edited by Bernice F. Guillaume. This is one in a series by The Schomberg Library of Nineteenth Century Black Women Writers, Oxford University Press. Included are published and unpublished works, poems, plays, vignettes, essays, sketches and memoirs as well as autobiographical statements.

When I travel to visit my daughter in Missouri, I always get together with fellow autoharpist **Alex Usher** to share some music. I have recorded a cassette tape *At Peace With Nathalie*, which is available for \$10.00 from 5751-1/2 Clemson Street, Los Angeles, CA 90016 - (923) 933-9957. Blessings to all." *NLF*

Editorial Postscript - On 1 February 1992, Rev. Forrest left for Geneva, Switzerland where she was to speak before the Human Rights Commission at the United Nations 44th Session. Her mission there was to represent the disabled community as a minister.