



TAR HEEL PEOPLE

Saints Among Us

Historic St. Thomas church continues to serve Wilmington's cultural community, thanks to the commitment of Betty Ann Sanders and her work with the St. Thomas Preservation Society.

BY MELISSA SLAVEN WARREN

On a typical morning, downtown Wilmington is quiet until the shops and restaurants open for business. On Dock Street, between Second and Third streets, the side basement entrance to St. Thomas Preservation Hall is open so people can come in and take a tour of the building for a possible wedding location.

As a florist and her helpers gently arrange white lilies and candelabras on the altar for an afternoon wedding, the interested visitors are guided to the turnaround room, where wedding guests can mingle after a ceremony while the happy couple takes photos. Leading the tour is 75-year-old Betty Ann Sanders.

Sanders is warmly dressed in a pink turtleneck layered with a sweater. The arms of her large, blue-rimmed glasses disappear into the sides of her perfect, silver hair. Sanders, a friendly, effervescent soul with a profound knowledge and fondness for the building, is accommodating and genuinely concerned that each couple's wedding day is exactly how they picture it. "Oh, this place is so beautiful," says one of the brides-to-be. "Isn't it?" Sanders says.

Betty Ann Sanders' enthusiasm illuminates St. Thomas Preservation Hall.

"It's nice to come in and see the place when they're decorating so you can get some ideas."

Date book in one hand and a pamphlet on the history of the building in the other, she moves the group from the turnaround room to the lobby, explaining the newly remodeled facilities. "The kitchen is fully equipped," Sanders says. "We've also updated the air-conditioning and refinished all the wood floors." This is a typical Saturday morning for Sanders, showing off her beloved St. Thomas. The building is booked nearly every weekend of the year for a wedding or function.

Sanders is one of the busiest women in Wilmington. Mention her name in community and cultural circles, and there is no need for further explanation. "When I think of Betty Ann, or when I introduce her to anyone, I think of one word: incomparable," says University of North Carolina at Wilmington Chancellor Rosemary DePaolo.

Sanders has several jobs, most of which are volunteer positions. Her list of titles includes documentary filmmaker, video and television personality, board member, and founder of an adult day care center for Alzheimer's patients. But most passionately, Sanders volunteers as executive director of St. Thomas Preservation Society, a nonprofit organization that oversees the restoration and rehabilitation of the former St. Thomas the Apostle Church.

"The heartbeat of downtown"

Eighteen years ago, Sanders, a former television station owner and broadcaster, got involved with the St. Thomas Preservation Society. She found comfort in its history and appreciated the important role the church played in the community of Wilmington and for the Catholic Church in the 1800s. "This building represents so much to me," says Sanders. "To me, it's kind of the



Serving Her Community

On October 8, the Lower Cape Fear chapter of the Sons of the American Revolution honored Betty Ann Sanders with the Good Citizenship Medal. This award is reserved for people of southeastern North Carolina who provide a significant contribution to community service.

"We can honor who we want," says William Holt, president of the Lower Cape Fear chapter. "But we're pretty stingy about who we give it to." Holt, who has known Sanders for more than five years, admires her life of consistent public service.

Sanders enjoyed a long career in broadcasting before leaving Dayton, Ohio, and coming to Wilmington 20 years ago. In addition to volunteering at St. Thomas and owning Coastal Adult Day Care, she tirelessly volunteers her time to the community on a variety of projects including:

UNCW Board of Visitors: Sanders is one of more than 60 volunteers appointed by the chancellor. Their mission is to provide the chancellor guidance in legislative relations, parent/student recruitment, and resource development. A focus of this group is to expand UNCW's audience and influence across the state, particularly in the metropolitan areas of Charlotte, the Triad, and the Triangle.

heartbeat of downtown."

Without hesitation, she took over the role of running St. Thomas. As executive director — a volunteer position — she assumes 100 percent responsibility for the maintenance, upkeep, and renovations, which could include scheduling and working with contractors and even fund-raising and financing. But the most important part of the job for Sanders is meeting people. Whether



UNCW's School of Nursing: Having served on the School of Nursing's board for more than 12 years, Sanders is perhaps the school's biggest cheerleader. In addition, she awards a yearly scholarship, The Betty Ann Sanders Nursing Scholarship, to nursing students at UNCW. "Many of our nursing students are married and/or raising families," says Sanders. "With the nursing shortage we're facing, we offer help to students, who want to help others by becoming nurses, see their goals through."

UNCW-TV: Sanders currently serves as host on two UNCW television productions: "Let's Read! UNCW and You" and "Spotlight." UNCW-TV produces a variety of programming that is broadcast on the Learning Network of the Cape Fear, Wilmington's local educational access television station.

she's showing the building to potential brides and grooms or offering the place to other nonprofit organizations for their use, Sanders says meeting people is her ultimate reward. "It's a very important component of my life," she says, smiling.

With its construction completed in 1847, St. Thomas became the first Catholic church in Wilmington. When the church first opened its doors,

Wilmington Star-News: Sanders serves as host for video spotlights for the *Wilmington Star-News* in conjunction with the online *Wilmington Magazine*. She just completed "How to Host a Luau." The short clips are fun and entertaining community-interest pieces.

Community Boys and Girls Club: Sanders volunteers her time as a member of the board. Her involvement with children started decades ago at the famous St. Jude's Children's Hospital. She was a friend of Danny Thomas, who inspired her to work with children. When she moved to Wilmington 20 years ago, she continued her involvement by working with the Community Boys and Girls Club. The organization's goal is to keep kids off of the street. Sanders believes in and supports the club's after-school programs. The staff teaches kids to use computers, makes sure homework gets done, and involves the kids in sports. Michael Jordan, one of Wilmington's most famous natives, participated in the Wilmington program.

Member of the Executive Committee of Thalian Hall: Sanders is on the executive committee of Thalian Hall. Thalian is one of the oldest theaters in America, and it enjoys an active, year-round performing arts schedule. "I'm so proud of our theater — of the facility and the caliber of talent we have," Sanders says. The committee is currently planning some renovations to the historic cultural center.

there were only 39 Catholics in the mission. St. Thomas served the Catholic population, both black and white, through the 19th century until St. Mary's Church on Fifth Avenue opened in 1911. At that time, the parish was divided, and St. Thomas became the Catholic church of the black community. The congregation remained active until the Catholic church decided to desegregate in the 1950s. St. Thomas' parishioners moved

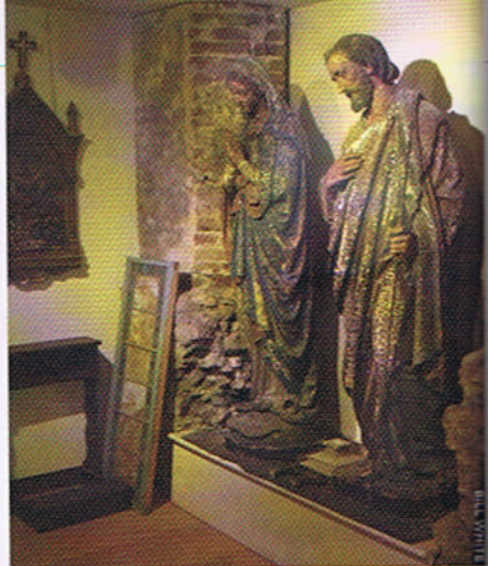
to St. Mary's Church, and St. Thomas was closed and deconsecrated.

In 1966, a fire heavily damaged the inside of the church. The interior was gutted, and nothing much was salvageable. Deep silt and mud covered the floors and walls. For four years, the building stood abandoned for the most part, and risked being torn down.

"The building was in really bad shape," says Sanders. "The diocese was contemplating tearing it down,

and a group of us got together and said 'If you give us the deed, we'll restore the building to perfection.' " In 1970, the Historic St. Thomas Preservation Society was established.

Today, through the help of grants, community spirit, and rental income, the Gothic Revival-style building with its stucco exterior and striking stained glass windows is completely renovated. "We have a new roof, new air conditioning, new carpet, new paint inside and out," says Sanders.



Life-size statues of Joseph and Mary stand in St. Thomas' small museum.

"All the floors have been sanded and re-stained and re-varnished."

In addition to its historical significance, the church, now called St. Thomas Preservation Hall, exists as an active part of Wilmington's community cultural scene as a venue for weddings, rehearsal dinners, receptions, meetings, and other corporate events.

Over the last several years, St. Thomas has become a popular wedding venue. The beautiful, brick-walled interior and exaggerated stained-glass windows provide an elegant setting. At St. Thomas, couples can have the experience of being married in a church setting if they aren't members of a church. Sanders' policy of booking only one event per day is especially accommodating to brides and grooms.

While weddings play a big part at St. Thomas, the hall serves the Wilmington community in a more significant capacity. Sanders regularly opens the doors free of charge to other nonprofit organizations that can't afford to rent a place for Christmas parties or banquets. Also, St. Thomas is again open to church groups, which have not met there since the building was deconsecrated in 1979.

"We have some new churches in the area that don't have their own buildings yet, and we welcome them to come in and have their services," says Sanders.

Sanders and the rest of the St. Thomas Preservation Society are always looking to the future. With



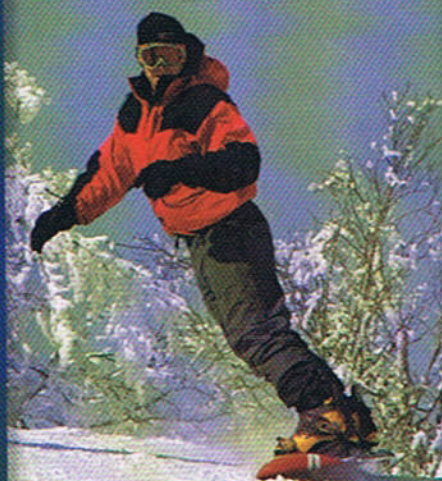
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numerous renovations completed this past year, there is always more to be done. The society is looking into the possibility of adding a landscaped flower garden soon.

Perhaps most noteworthy, Sanders and the other members of the preservation society hope to add sainthood to the church's already full history. St. Thomas is already listed on the National Register of Historic Places, and now Father Thomas Price, pastor of St. Thomas Church from 1860 to 1919 and the first North Carolinian to enter the Catholic priesthood, is up for sainthood. If he is made a saint, St. Thomas could become a Catholic pilgrimage site.

"We are just ecstatic," says Sanders. "This will be one of the most famous buildings in the world. We've never had a saint from North Carolina before. We are getting all of our documentation in order. We are just thrilled."


If Father Price is awarded sainthood, then St. Thomas may just become a little busier than normal — something Sanders won't mind.

Helping others have a great day

When she isn't at St. Thomas, Sanders can be found talking with patients or patting a caregiver on the back at her other true love: the Coastal Adult Day Care center. The center nurtures advanced Alzheimer's patients, as well as patients with other memory disorders and stroke victims. Sanders, along with her daughter, Jennifer Riker, founded Coastal four-and-a-half years ago with the goal to provide patients with an alternative to entering a long-term care facility. The center provides therapeutic techniques using conversation, socialization, and recreation.

"We want our caregivers to know that when they bring their loved ones to Coastal, they'll be loved and hugged and fed and have a great day, so they [the caregivers] can have a great day," says Sanders.

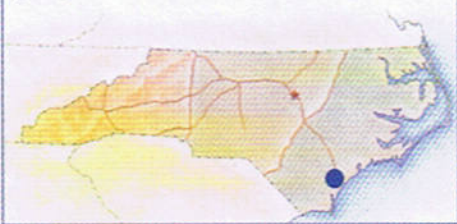
Helping others who struggle with the devastating disease of Alzheimer's has personal significance for Sanders. Her husband of 40 years, Jack, passed away almost two years ago after a long battle with Alzheimer's.

Whether Sanders is scheduling appointments for St. Thomas, taking care of her patients at Coastal Adult Day Care, serving as host for a program on UNCW-TV, or offering her opinions at a board meeting, her commitment to community is clear and unselfish. Not only does she give of her time, but she gives of her heart as well. 

Melissa Slaven Warren lives in Wilmington.


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