Rapid City NPM Chapter Founder's Spotlight – Jacqueline Schnittgrund

Jacqueline (Jackie) Schnittgrund is known by many in Rapid City for her years of service as a music educator at Robbinsdale Elementary and as music director of the 50+ voice *Chorus Angelorum* choir (formerly of Blessed Sacrament Church, Rapid City) for over 44 years. Her recognition extends across the Rapid City Diocese as a founding member of the Rapid City Chapter for National Pastoral Musicians (NPM), which has been active for nearly 35 years. This latter role led to involvement in the national NPM organization that spanned 20 years and brought Schnittgrund national recognition as a respected leader in promoting, educating, and facilitating growth in music ministry in Catholic liturgy.



In honor of Jackie Schnittgrund's enormous and lasting contributions to the local Rapid City NPM Chapter, the current board members of the Rapid City NPM Chapter present this 'Founder's Spotlight' and tribute to her lifetime of work in music ministry.

Family History of Service to the Church

A native of the small community of Frankfort, SD, Jacqueline Robinson became immersed in her family's culture of service to the church community at an early age. She recalls starting to sing in the church choir at age 8, the majority of which was comprised of members of the extended Robinson family. She began accompanying on the organ for Masses at age 15, and drew inspiration from her great grandmother, Barbara Valder Robinson who, when she was a young girl, raised funds for a new church organ by putting on plays at her family's hotel and riding by horseback around the county to collect donations from parishioners. Barbara succeeded in raising enough money for the organ purchase and was the first person to play the organ in Spink County on All Saints Day, Nov 1, 1890, at the age of 15. She continued as organist for the next 65 years, and was succeeded by her daughter, Zita Liebig. The vocation of priesthood called Barbara's uncle, Fr. Stephen Duren and her nephew, Fr. Hubert Duren. Jackie also recalls a great grand uncle who served 35 years as choir director in his church, and upon his passing, the director's role was taken up by his son. Barbara met her future husband, Oliver Robinson, when he came to Frankfort to care for his brother, Fr. Charles Robinson, Frankfort's parish priest, who was battling typhoid fever. One of Barbara and Oliver's granddaughters, Sr. Vianney Mannie, celebrated her 75th Jubilee in 2024.

While continuing to play and sing for weekend Masses, in high school Jackie also accompanied for High Mass on Monday's, Wednesday's, and Friday's, and assisted with preparation for the children's Christmas pageants at church. Around Frankfort and neighboring communities, she has fun memories of the 'shower circuit' where she and her sister Jennifer would entertain at parishioners' bridal and baby showers – Jennifer on the piano and Jackie singing. These experiences served to inspire Schnittgrund into a lifetime of service to the Church in a variety of roles, as a lector, teacher in parochial schools, serving on liturgy committees, and music (accompanying, singing, directing, NPM).

Priests Are Human, Too

Schnittgrund speaks with tremendous love and respect for the positive influence for over 11 years of their parish priest in Frankfort and Redfield, Fr. Noel Power, a native of Ballyduff, in County Cork, Ireland. Fr. Power would make weekly visits to the homes of his parishioners, and Jackie remembers many an evening meal with Fr. Power as their dinner guest. The evenings involved music and singing, with Fr. Power playing the squeeze-box. Over dinner, they would have open discussions and debate across a wide spectrum of topics. While disagreements occasionally took a spirited turn, the underlying discussions were founded in love and respect. Jackie recalls Fr. Power approached his vocation with great humility, advising his congregation that priests are first humans and can make mistakes just like everyone else, nor should they ever be put on a pedestal. This instilled in her the value and importance of engaging 'beyond the superficial' in working with clergy and getting to know them as people. Years later, after Fr. Power's death, Jackie travelled to Ballyduff, Ireland to say a loving "Ave" over his grave.

The Power of Persuasion and Affirmations

Schnittgrund particularly remembers the work of God's hand through Fr. Power, in the 'conversion' of her maternal grandmother, who was raised Methodist and harbored very anti-Catholic views. In her grandmother's later years, marred by illness and hospitalizations, Fr. Power would make daily visits to her grandmother. He would sit quietly through her barrage of comments and simply offer a presence of concern and support to her. Over time, her grandmother's viewpoints on Catholicism softened and a deep friendship evolved. This deeply impressed upon Jackie the importance and value of giving affirmations to people through acts and words of kindness. The motto 'emulate Christ through one's actions' has become her daily prayer throughout her life, and one never leaves a conversation with Jackie without her giving words of praise, encouragement, or support.



Wedding Day, 1970, officiated by Fr. Noel Power.

Jackie's goal from an early age was to be a teacher. While she considered teaching English, music, or history, music was her eventual choice, and unbeknownst to her at the time, it was a decision that would shape her career and vocation in ways she never imagined. After graduating in 3 years from Northern State University in Aberdeen with a degree in secondary education in music for grades K-12, she married her high school sweetheart, Jim Schnittgrund. As the newlyweds prepared to move to Sturgis, Fr. Power encouraged Jackie to play and sing at the Cathedral in Rapid City. For Jackie, this seemed an unattainable goal for someone from the little town of Frankfort, but it planted the seed of thought for her involvement in liturgical music in Rapid City, West River, and beyond.

Persevere Through Hardships

Hardships and financial struggle came early to this young couple. With a new baby, Marti Jo, in tow, they moved to Rapid City in December 1971. Six months later, they lost their home and all their possessions in the June 1972 Rapid City flood. After the birth of their second child, Tammy, Schnittgrund's music teaching was put on hold for a few years when she began experiencing hearing

loss in both ears. Diagnosed with otosclerosis, she eventually underwent a surgical procedure (stapedectomy) after their third child, Lon, was born, which successfully restored her hearing. Schnittgrund reflects on those challenging times with gratitude for friends who volunteered to take them in after the flood and offered care and support for her family as she struggled with hearing loss. It deepened her empathy for the suffering of others and solidified her belief in the power of prayer.

Through Encouragement, A Choir Is Born

By this time, the Schnittgrunds were parishioners at the Cathedral of Our Lady of Perpetual Help. The trio of Faye Enterman, Pat Weber, and Peggy Langenfeld coordinated playing, singing, and directing the choirs at the church. Faye encouraged Jackie to join the choir, and she also played organ there for a time. After moving to the west side of Rapid City and joining Blessed Sacrament Church in 1977, she learned there were no choirs at that church except for Easter and Christmas services. Burt Theissen was the director for these twice-a-year choirs, and when he was unable to direct that year, Joe Connolly (with whom Jackie had sung when they both attended Cathedral) recruited Jackie to direct. Schnittgrund recalls Bernice Leichtnam (mother to Mary Harris and aunt to Christi Leichtnam) directed the funeral choir and helped her get started. Leichtnam secured funding to pay Jackie for the job, and with Fr. Bob Baden's encouragement, she eventually took over the funeral choir, and their group progressed to singing at weekend Masses.

National Pastoral Musicians

Acting on the suggestion from Peggy Langenfeld, in the spring of 1979, Jackie (Blessed Sacrament), Peggy (OLPH), and Therese Kaiser (St. Therese) received funding from their parishes to attend a convention in Chicago, put on by a new organization for Catholic musicians called NPM (National Association of Pastoral Music). The convention provided focus on liturgy (a new term to many, including the Rapid City attendees), and the emphasis on 'music ministers' rather than 'musicians.' There was an abundance of resources who explained the Mass, the liturgy, and musical requirements. Of particular interest were sessions led by Fr. Eugene Walsh, Elaine Rendler, and a new and upcoming group called the St. Louis Jesuits. Schnittgrund was particularly struck by comments from Fr. Eugene Walsh as he quoted documents that underscored the importance of good liturgy. He emphasized, "Liturgy done well fosters faith, while liturgy done poorly, or not well, can diminish or even destroy faith." This resonated strongly for Jackie and reinforced her desire to always strive for excellence in music ministry and not settle for mediocrity.

They returned from the convention filled with new and informative insights on the role that music (and music ministers) can play in liturgical celebrations. After consultation with Margaret Thompson in Faith, they collectively decided our diocese and its music ministers could benefit from the knowledge that could be gained from forming an NPM chapter. They acquired the materials to do so from the NPM office in Washington, DC, and a Rapid City NPM Chapter was established.

Through the teachings received from NPM, Schnittgrund marvels at the changes they were able to pioneer and successfully implement across the Diocese of Rapid City. Up until that time, psalms were recited at Mass. They incorporated the singing of psalms and trained cantors on the role. They helped evolve the role of ushers into the ministry of hospitality, and incorporated families to help welcome parishioners to Mass and distribute worship aids as people entered the church. They facilitated training for lectors and began ordering lector aids for individuals in that ministry.

During the 1980's, Schnittgrund and her family lived for a time in Anchorage, AK and near Los Angeles, CA. In Anchorage, she helped establish an NPM chapter, and at the recommendation of her parish priest, joined the Liturgy Commission of the Archdiocese of Anchorage. While on this Commission, she advised the working of parishes managed by the parish administrator and assisted in establishing rubrics for diocesan worship. During her time in California, while unsuccessful in creating an NPM chapter in the Los Angeles diocese, she gained experience leading both a children's choir and a folk group at their parish in addition to teaching Religion I at Paraclete High School.

The Role of Visionary and Facilitator for Growth

In 1999, Schnittgrund was invited by the national NPM organization to serve on their Council for Chapters. This role opened tremendous opportunities and allowed her to interact with the great influencers and leaders in Catholic music across the country. Through Jackie's work on this council, she helped revise the Chapter Manual utilized by Chapters across the country and implemented measures to have chapters provide annual reports of their activities back to the national office. In time, she and Dr. Robert Wolf co-chaired the National Council of Chapters. When Dr. Wolf resigned, Jackie led the Council of Chapters herself as well as serving on the National Council of NPM that advised the Board of Directors.

Locally, under Schnittgrund's leadership of the Rapid City NPM Chapter, the 2000's and 2010's marked many firsts for the chapter – annual commissioning of music ministers, providing training workshops to all diocesan music ministers to improve their music skills, inviting national speakers and clinicians to offer training and education opportunities (the 2005 Cantor Express workshop held at St. Martin's was the largest in the nation, with over 50 participants), collaborations with the American Guild of Organists (AGO) and inviting esteemed leaders and composers of Catholic music to lead choir festivals for our diocesan musicians. Schnittgrund initiated the start of the Chapter's annual St. Cecilia banquet and awards. Her ideas on awarding music ministers for both longevity of service and for their contributions in music ministry in their parish/diocesan community were recognized by the national NPM organization and inspired many chapters across the country to initiate similar awards programs within their respective chapters.





Above Left: Participants in the 2005 'NPM Cantor Express' workshop, at St. Martins. With over 50 participants, it was the largest Cantor Express workshop in the United States that year.

Above Right: 2006 Choir Festival, conducted by composer Dr. Tom Porter (OLPH)





Above Left: Jackie receives Chapter Leader of the Year award (2012). **Above Right:** Original NPM Council of Chapters

In acknowledgement of her groundbreaking work, Schnittgrund was awarded NPM Chapter Leader of the Year at the 2012 national NPM convention in Pittsburgh. For their work on the National Committee for NPM Chapters, Jackie, along with Dr. Robert Wolf and Margie Kilty, were awarded NPM Chapter Leaders of the Year at the 2014 national convention. Of great pride to Jackie, her daughter Tammy Schnittgrund, who by then had already served for several years on the national NPM Cantor Certification Commission, was appointed Chair of that program in 2016. The highlight of 2019 was the Rapid City NPM Chapter being awarded the NPM Chapter of the Year award at the national NPM convention held in Raleigh, NC. In early 2020, Schnittgrund stepped down from her role on the National Committee for NPM Chapters, after having served the national NPM organization for nearly 20 years.





Above Left: Front Row, L-R: Jackie Schnittgrund, Dr. Robert Wolf, and Margie Kilty with their National Committee for Chapters after receiving the NPM Leaders of the Year (2014) **Above Right:** Jackie with her 2014 Chapter Leader of the Year award.

Schnittgrund looks back with profound gratitude for the NPM experience. At the national level, she was able to engage in discussions and establish deep and lasting friendships both with leaders in Catholic clergy as well as esteemed leaders and composers of Catholic music across the country. Locally, it

provided her opportunities to meet and learn about the successes and struggles of music ministers across our diocese, and through attending the national conventions, she brought back countless educational opportunities and ideas to share with them to improve and innovate their ministerial role.

Don't Ask 'If,' ask 'How'

Schnittgrund lives by the same key rules which she instilled in her students over the years – "Don't ask 'if,' ask 'how.' Set goals for yourself, stay determined, and don't allow obstacles to stand in your way to accomplishing your goals." Her "watch, listen, learn" approach has helped her see the potential in people and in ideas, and has led to many successes in music ministry in our diocese.

This approach was evidenced most recently in 2024, when at the Spring NPM Chapter meeting, music ministers in the northern parts of the diocese expressed concerns on the limited availability of accompanists and noted that the complexity of some published accompaniments (particularly for Mass parts) were often a deterrent to young or novice keyboardists. Calls to the publishers for simplified arrangements were met with no results. Upon hearing this, Schnittgrund advised the meeting attendees, "Then let's do this ourselves - we have the talent and the resources within our diocese to make this (simplified arrangements) possible." Within a week, she contacted several experienced accompanists in the diocese and recruited them to develop simplified accompaniment (piano & guitar) for the most commonly used Mass settings in our diocese, and their work was completed within a few months. By the end of 2024, copyright permissions with the publishers were secured to distribute the arrangements in our diocese. The process to distribute copies of the arrangements to parishes across our diocese is currently underway and has been met with great excitement and appreciation by our diocesan musicians. Fueled by Schnittgrund's 'can-do' encouragement and initiative, it became a marvelous collaborative learning experience for the diocesan music ministers.



Chorus Angelorum, Midnight Mass Christmas 2017, Blessed Sacrament Church, Rapid City
Serving the life and mission of the Church through fostering the art of musical liturgy in Catholic worshiping communities.

My Choir Family

"Next to my family," Schnittgrund often quotes, "I love my choir family." With her stepping in to lead a small group in 1977, she saw her church choir (Chorus Angelorum) at Blessed Sacrament Church in Rapid City grow over the next 44 years from a handful of singers to a choir of 50+ voices. She was able to incorporate up to 25-member orchestral accompaniment with her choir for Christmas, Easter, and other special liturgies throughout the Church year. Jackie helped develop a music library that started with 12 copies of the Catholic Hymnal to hundreds of music arrangements, of 50+ copies each. Over the years, the choir made three CDs of their music. Through proceeds from CD sales, fundraising efforts by her choir and donations by parish benefactors, they were able to contribute equipment valued at over \$250,000 to the church, including two organs, a grand piano, a synthesizer, choir risers, oak chairs, an amplifier and other sound system items. Schnittgrund unfailingly started and ended each rehearsal with prayer. Deep and lasting friendships developed over the years throughout the choir, and to this day they remain present for one another through personal joys, successes and challenges.

A Choir Director for Voices of All Ages

While now semi-active in liturgical music ministry, Schnittgrund's love for music and teaching has not waned. In 2022 she accepted the role of music director at Westhills Retirement Village, and now conducts the Village Voices Choir, comprised of both Westhills' residents and community members across Rapid City. In just over 2 years, the size of the choir has doubled (now over 30 members) and they perform between 7-10 concerts per year at the retirement center. In January 2025, the Village Voices Choir was invited to perform at the ACDA (American Choral Directors Association) state meeting in Rapid City. Performing alongside several high school and collegiate choirs across the state, the Village Voices Choir was the only West River choir invited to attend, and their group of senior vocalists greatly impressed the convention attendees not only with the variety of musical genres in their selections but with their vocal skills, as well.

During the concert, Schnittgrund spoke to the convention attendees with great eloquence and support of 'senior voices.' She noted that while the human voice does change as one ages, they can still add tremendous value to any intergenerational choir. Members of the Village Voices Choir credit Jackie with fostering and improving their vocal abilities. They added "Jackie helps us see beyond what we think is possible and takes us to new levels in musicality." Members have embraced the challenge and are having great fun doing so. Schnittgrund in turn, credits the Village Voices Choir with teaching her to persevere through loss, and is filled with admiration for its choir members.

Postlude / Reflections

Schnittgrund offered the following reflections on her years in the music ministry and her hopes for the Rapid City NPM Chapter.

Successes -

- I was so proud that all my children and grandchildren were involved in Chorus Angelorum at one time or another. That totally filled my heart with joy! My granddaughter, Elizabeth Nesland Schmid, served as Choral Director at the Newman Center while attending UNL. That was so wonderful!
- The three CDs that Chorus Angelorum produced were a tremendous amount of work, but the benefits were well worth it. They were very well done and appreciated by those who bought them in

- our diocese as well as throughout the United States. We were able to contribute the profits to the music department at Blessed Sacrament for all the music ministers' benefit.
- The thrill and honor of conducting a 50+ choir and 20+member orchestra for Christmas and Easter liturgies. One particular Christmas, a stranger came up to me afterward and said that he had been at St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York City the Christmas prior. I was about to say that I knew the director, Jenny Pasqual, when he continued by saying, "Your choir was better!" I begged to differ with him as I had heard the choir at St. Patrick's in the past. They were excellent! He continued, "It's because your singers truly believe in what they are singing. It's evident in their faces and their sound." That was the best Christmas present that I had ever received.
- The friendships that I have made through Chorus Angelorum, with musicians across the diocese, and the National Council of NPM Chapters have been so wonderful. My choir became and still is part of my family. I love and care for them all! Their love fills me to overflowing. I have been in awe and amazement at the people throughout the United States that I've met through NPM. If my dad had lived to see me having lunch and sharing thoughts with a cardinal of the Church, I doubt that he would have been able to put his head around it. That "celebrity" musicians, composers, and clinicians would seek out my advice, has brought me a tremendous amount of joy...after all in my youth all I wanted when I got older was to have a built-in dishwasher!!!! My music ministry and NPM have added richness to my life that I never anticipated, but that I gratefully appreciate.

Challenges -

In years past, our diocese had a vision of establishing committees within our parishes whose members would reflect the parish as a whole. They would be the eyes and ears of the people setting forth programs and procedures that would carry on parish business with the approval of the pastor. These committees would include finance, parish councils, liturgy committees, religious ed., prayer, etc. In this way when a new pastor was assigned to the parish, there would be little upheaval or changes made. That was the intent, but sadly it has not come to a full realization. Consequently, as new pastors arrived in our parish, major changes were usually made and often to meet the pastor's taste or vision. As a music minister, this could be very frustrating as we are encouraged to make short- and long-term plans. These plans, although well thought out, would often have to be discarded. For many music ministers, this upheaval during pastor transitions has been very discouraging as it has been for me.

Regrets -

- I had hoped to have 'A Lesson in Carols' during Advent at Terra Sancta with singers, instruments, and proclaimers of the Word. My friend from the Cathedral in Arlington, VA had shared a version that he used. Although I knew that Chorus Angelorum was very capable of doing this, I never found the time to do it. This is a wonderful service but sadly, I never got this done.
- I wish that I had emphasized more often the importance of having choirs in our churches. Often, I have heard music ministers in our diocese state that their emphasis is on congregational singing while ignoring choral music. It is clearly stated in the liturgical documents that there is room for both choral and congregational singing. I suspect many thought that it was one or the other and through NPM programming I think we failed to impress upon our music ministers the importance of both. As a result, the number of Catholic choirs in our diocese has diminished greatly in the past 40 years.

• I regret not keeping up my organ playing skills. Although I had a strong start through high school and college, I failed to keep it up and consequently, was unable to utilize it throughout my ministry.

My Hope for NPM in the Future -

Since its inception, NPM Chapters' purpose was to be a source of knowledge for its music ministers. My hope for our chapter is that it will continue to be a place where our music ministers learn and grow through their music and faith. In doing so, the support that they give one another will strengthen that resolve. When attending NPM Chapter meetings, my prayer is they are inspired to dream of what can be and through their actions enliven and strengthen the faith of the people in their parishes. Hopefully, through their attendance at NPM Chapter meetings, they will be availed many the wonderful resources that are available to Catholic music ministers which can lead to rich and inspiring worship. The chapter can be an inspiration for many to improve their skills in all areas of liturgy and serve to steer them away from settling for mediocrity. My prayer is that the priests in our diocese will consider NPM a partner and ally in their quest for life-giving liturgies.



Left: Jackie was the featured 'Sage on Stage' at the Winter 2024 NPM Chapter meeting.

During her presentation, she discussed her inspiration in music ministry, "You know, beauty is of God. ...Believe in the beauty of listening...to the beauty that creates intimacy with God. How many times have you been at a funeral, and seen people cry due to the effect of the music? You must be convinced that what you do can make a difference in people's lives and their relationship with Jesus Christ." Above all: "Love what you're doing." It's contagious.



Throughout Schnittgrund's career as a music educator, she established standards for excellence and innovation, coated with humor and genuine love and compassion for her young students. This approach earned her multiple awards and recognition, through 'Good Apple,' Star Teacher,' and 'Teacher of Distinction' awards. Many of her former students who still reside in Rapid City speak with great fondness and fun memories of singing with 'Mrs. S.'





Above Left: Jackie, with granddaughter Elizabeth, accepting the Highmark Star Teacher award. Above Right: Schnittgrund with her students from Robbinsdale Elementary and Garfield Elementary

For her service in the church and in music ministry,

"It was through your help that the Liturgy was a deeply moving and spiritual experience for many of those who participated." – Fr. Richard Novotny (1984), in thanks to Jackie directing the Festival Liturgy.

"It is wonderful to see that your many contributions and lifelong dedication to music ministry have been recognized by your peers and leaders of NPM. Know of my gratitude for all that you do. May God bless you and your ministry abundantly." – Bishop Robert Gruss (2012), in congratulating Jackie for being awarded NPM's Outstanding Chapter Director Award.

Perhaps the impact of Jackie's work was most beautifully expressed by Fr. Steven Moore, whom Jackie worked with in the Archdiocese of Anchorage. Fr. Moore wrote, "The Commission for Liturgy for the Archdiocese has greatly benefitted from your presence. You have brought to the Commission a concern for professionalism in liturgy, particularly in music, and have worked tirelessly toward that end. Our Commission is greatly in your debt for the work you have done. I know wherever you live you will continue to work for good liturgy. You place your gifts at the service of the Church wherever you may be."



Above: 2018 Interdenominational Festival of Hymns. Co-Directors, Jackie Schnittgrund and Dr. James Feiszli





Above Left: Rapid City NPM Chapter co-founders, L-R, Margaret Thompson (St. Cecilia for Laity award winner), Jackie Schnittgrund, at our Chapter's first St. Cecilia awards banquet (2003)

Above Right: Rapid City NPM Chapter co-founders, L-R, Therese Kaiser Aberle, Jackie Schnittgrund (2019)





Above Left: Jackie presents Msgr. Woster the St. Cecilia for Laity at our Chapter's first St. Cecilia awards banquet (2003). Above Right: L-R, Dr. Lee Gwozdz, national speaker at 2015 Fall Chapter meeting, Kathy Little (Peggy Langenfeld Memorial winner), Carman Timmerman, Jackie Schnittgrund



Above Left: Service Year award winners at Fall 2023 NPM Chapter meeting. L-R, Bev Keffeler, Sheila Schweitzer (for Fauneil Keller), Msgr. Michael Woster, Barry Furze, Jackie Schnittgrund, Sue Englin.

We, the board members of the Rapid City NPM Chapter, offer our sincere gratitude and appreciation to Jackie Schnittgrund. Now approaching nearly 35 years in active existence, our chapter is one of very few across the United States to have stayed in existence this long, and that is due in large part to Jackie's work. May the current and future leaders within this Chapter sustain her goal to help all music ministers "be convinced that what you do can make a difference in people's lives and their relationship with Jesus Christ" and keep the torch lit on providing education, support and fellowship to our diocesan musicians through NPM!

FIND MORE INFORMATION ABOUT NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF PASTORAL MUSICIANS RAPID CITY CHAPTER BY GOING TO:

NPMRC.ORG OR FACEBOOK

AND THE NATIONAL NPM BY GOING TO:

NPM.ORG