Hendricks Chapel nurtures spirituality through ceremony, service, and support

BY AMY SHIRES

On Sunday mornings Hendricks Chapel bears all the customary hallmarks of a place of religious worship. Prayer, song, fellowship, and ritual are practiced at the weekly interdenominational service in celebration of the ongoing tradition of Syracuse University’s interfaith community, much as they have been since the chapel first opened in 1930. The surprising thing—the inspiring thing—is all the ways that spiritual life is honored come Monday, when thoughts habitually turn from the holy to the practical, and activities shift from the reverence of the Sabbath to the business of the work week.

In the chapel, scheduling secretary Sue Martini takes time to tend the flowering plants that line the stage area, checking to see whether they need water. She thanks the custodian, who moves within a circle of sunlight as he mops the chapel’s floors, and apologizes to him for the mess. “It’s been busy here,” she says. “A convocation on Friday and two concerts over the weekend.” He stops, smiles, and replies, “No problem,” then goes back to swishing his mop back and forth.

Downstairs, the lively chatter of students mingles with the aroma of freshly brewed coffee at People’s Place, the chapel’s student-operated cafe. Amid the Monday morning activity in the Office of the Dean, Ginny Yerdon, the chapel’s events coordinator and administrative specialist, greets an early visitor and comments on the pleasant weather. She pauses for a moment as the dean’s grandfather clock begins to chime the hour. And with that tranquil, dusky toll, another ordinary day
Hendricks Chapel is a haven for the SU community during personal tragedies and crises.

Our commitment is to be a welcome and caring presence on campus that is open to all people,” says the Reverend Thomas V. Wolfe G’02, dean of Hendricks Chapel. That commitment is played out in every aspect of the chapel’s work, from the amiable detail of ensuring all telephone calls are answered to such a grave matter as keeping the chapel doors open around the clock during the traumatic days following September 11, 2001. “It is a matter of hospitality, which has a deep religious context,” Wolfe says. “In most religions there is a hospitality code that says, ‘You receive the stranger no matter what, and you offer what is needed.’” Hendricks Chapel meets those needs through a diverse range of spiritual, cultural, and educational programs and services, including memorial services, lectures, musical performances (see related story, page 23), Remembrance Scholar ceremonies, and one of the nation’s largest annual commemorations of Martin Luther King Jr. “I believe you define yourself by what you have to give,” Wolfe says. “That’s the spirit with which our staff comes here, and that’s the spirit with which we try to meet each day.”

Seth Hiler ’02 first experienced that spirit of hospitality as a member of the Hendricks Chapel Choir when he was a freshman in the College of Visual and Performing Arts. While at SU, he worked as a student proctor in the dean’s office, participated in numerous projects through Students Offering Service, and helped organize and coordinate numerous chapel weddings. “Tom Wolfe always says the proctor job is one of the most important jobs at the chapel because we are the first to answer calls or greet visitors,” Hiler says. “It’s important for anyone, whether they are coming in to research an academic project or seeking counseling from one of the chaplains, to be welcomed with the warmth that the chapel embodies.”

Selected as a Remembrance Scholar in his senior year, Hiler also participated in the Interfaith Middle East Experience. This peacemaking initiative, established to encourage religious tolerance in the face of world turmoil, brings together Christian, Jewish, and Muslim students for a series of seminars and discussions culminating in a trip abroad to study the history of the three faiths in another country. “Hendricks is much more than just a place to worship,” Hiler says. “It is a true interfaith community that accepts people and celebrates their differences. It is a community of fellowship, debate, and learning; a place to go for support, education, and discussion.”

THE SPIRITUAL HEART OF THE CAMPUS

As an interfaith community that serves as host to 8 chaplaincies and
20 other religious groups, the chapel encourages people of all faiths to worship and practice according to their traditions, while also upholding an attitude of reverence for the diverse beliefs of others. “When I interview new chaplain candidates, I ask, ‘Can you stand next to a person with a radically different faith tradition than yours, and can you stand with that person with honest and real respect?’” Wolfe says. “But I also tell them, ‘I will advocate for you to have full expression of your faith tradition. You have to be able to say what you feel, believe what you believe, and express that in ritual, in practice, and in day-to-day accomplishments. And I will support you completely in your right to do that. Because it is my firm belief that if people feel secure and know where their advocacy is, then all the good boundaries have been established; all of the good relationships can then be made. People can be who they are and feel supported.’”

In her role as Episcopal chaplain, the Reverend Christine J. Day sees herself as a guest of the University whose mission is to provide chaplain care for her own denomination and the SU community-at-large as needed. “Within a parish, I would be restricted to responding to those of my denomination,” she says. “Here, especially in times of crisis, chaplains respond to the whole community.” Day believes Hendricks offers something special to the University community. “Mostly, what we do here is listen,” she says. “Our doors are open to anybody—as a chapel, and as individual chaplains and staff members. It’s wonderful to witness students as they make academic leaps and realize that the same growth occurs in their spiritual lives.”

Kathryn Weber ’03, a College of Arts and Sciences philosophy major with a minor in psychology, considers the spiritual support she finds at Hendricks Chapel a key part of her SU experience. “It definitely helps to come here when I’m feeling stressed out,” she says. “I’ll just sit in the chapel a while or hang out and talk in the chaplain’s office and automatically feel better.” A peer minister with the Lutheran Campus Ministry during her sophomore year, Weber now volunteers each week at the House of Prayer, an after-school program at a local church. She also joins students from other campus ministries in the Hendricks Chapel Cup, a yearlong tournament that brings together students of different faiths for such team sports as softball, football, and soccer. “It’s a lot of fun, and it fits in with everything Hendricks is about,” Weber says. “We’re involved with people of other religions in a way that lets us share who we are and find out who they are.”

At Syracuse University—and on college campuses across the country—the spiritual needs and practices of students are changing. There was a time in the nation’s history, especially after World War II, when people saw going to church as their civic responsibility. “That’s how they perceived it,” Wolfe says. “Worship service was synonymous with being responsible in the world.” But a cultural shift has resulted in a generation of students that doesn’t necessarily define itself as religious. “When students say that, they mean, ‘I’m not traditional, I don’t consider myself a member of a particular body, and I don’t intend to worship or adhere to a particular liturgy or religious practice,’” Wolfe says. “And yet they are in touch with the fact that there is more to them than a mind and a body. There is this other thing called a spirit. But their spirituality is far less defined in traditional religious terms.”

Weber agrees. “Going to church can be hard for students,” she says. “Mom and Dad aren’t here to make you attend wor-
ship services. Now it’s a personal decision—a commitment you have to make independently. Because it’s important to me and gives me a lot, I share that in my conversations with other students.”

Although there are exceptions, the tendency now is for students to express and practice their spirituality through service rather than traditional worship. “People of earlier generations sometimes get concerned that places of worship aren’t filling like they used to,” Wolfe says. “But I have hope. As the dean of a university chapel, I have a responsibility to understand students and to challenge and interpret what they are saying. And what I hear them saying is they are no less religious than they’ve ever been. It’s just that the form has changed. So students will volunteer to build a house, clean up a park, or mentor kids, and that’s much more yoked to their notion of spirituality than attending a service on Sunday.”

Throughout each academic year, students are invited to volunteer in various projects sponsored by Students Offering Service (SOS), including the International Young Scholars Program (see related story, page 25), Hendricks Chapel Quiltmakers, Habitat for Humanity, CROP Walk for Hunger, and the Share the Warmth Blanket Drive. “There are many ways to connect here,” says Francis McMillan Parks, director of SOS and African American Programs. “Because our commitment is to the development of the citizen scholar, everything we do is about locating ‘the self’ in the cause of others. We see ourselves not as doing charitable work, but as being in partnership with the community. In that spirit, we seek opportunities to be good neighbors and to participate in the reciprocity of learning that becomes possible when we step into others’ lives.”

As a historian and sociologist, Parks believes service must be grounded in an appreciation for the history of the world’s ongoing struggle for peace and justice. For example, when students volunteer with the International Young Scholars Program, Parks first teaches them about Ellis Island and the history of immigration in the United States. “Francis is always pointing us to the historic relevance of what we’re doing, which makes us say, ‘Wow, this is more than just a good thing to do,’” Wolfe says. “It’s empowering to participate in a historical movement.”

Former SOS participant Hiler, who is working toward a master of fine arts degree at the New York Academy of Art in New York City, credits Parks with motivating him to pursue a painting career. “Although I was an illustration major, she talked me into painting a series of portraits,” he says. Titled Spirit of Lantern, the portraits are displayed annually to honor otherwise unheralded community members who have dedicated their lives to service. Hiler found the experience of creating the portraits challenging and exciting. “It’s interesting how life works out,” he says. “Francis was doing what she’s so good at—making connections that match people’s gifts with methods for solving the social injustices of the world. In doing that, she helped me more clearly define my career path.”
A PORT IN THE STORM
Throughout its history, Hendricks Chapel has served as a haven in times of crisis. Whether the University community experiences a personal tragedy, such as the death of a student, or is struggling to cope with the life-altering ramifications of the terrorist bombing of Pan Am Flight 103 or the 9/11 terrorist attacks, it turns to Hendricks Chapel for support and guidance. “When you’re being pounded by a storm, you reach out to hold onto something solid,” says University spokesman Kevin Morrow. “At SU, that something is our chapel. The chaplains and staff convey a sense of comfort, caring, and strength that is essential in times of trouble.”

Morrow is part of a Syracuse University crisis management team that includes student affairs director Mary Jo Custer, undergraduate studies administrative assistant Judith O’Rourke ’75, and Division of International Programs Abroad (DIPA) deputy director Jon Booth.

Booth credits Wolfe as an invaluable resource for DIPA, supporting the University’s international programs in such ways as addressing a recent meeting of European center directors and chairing the University committee on planning International Week activities. “We appreciate the chapel’s commitment to internationalism, which is a ‘signature experience’ in the University’s Academic Plan,” Booth says.

As a representative of the University, Wolfe has also traveled to Florence and London to provide spiritual support for the families and friends of two students who died while overseas. “Tom is very caring and understanding when talking to students and their families, here or abroad,” says Custer, who is team-teaching a crisis management course with Wolfe this semester. “He’s a good listener, a strong role model, and a leader who brings together the University community to grieve, to celebrate, and to remember.”

Wolfe sees the role of stepping in during a crisis as one of the most significant services the chapel provides—a constructive effort to deal responsibly with personal and cultural pain, as well as issues of social justice and reconciliation. “In moments of conflict or great loss, we open the doors of the chapel, light a candle at the head of the aisle, and invite people in,” he says. “Everyone can feel free in this space to express feelings of sorrow, grief, or even anger. Here, we stand next to those who are in pain, whether or not we agree with them, and—with great respect—help them express it in a constructive way. That is the power of this place, and I believe in it in my soul.”

A Warm Welcome
ADOHL, A 6-YEAR-OLD SUDANESE GIRL, MUNCHES ON Cheetos and listens intently to an SU student tutor reading her a story while they sit snuggled in a chair in the Noble Room at Hendricks Chapel. “My favorite things to do here are reading and coloring,” Adohl says with a smile. She is one of some two dozen refugee children between the ages of 5 and 15 who attend the International Young Scholars Program, one of many projects created and run by Hendricks Chapel’s Students Offering Service (SOS). The program started about eight years ago in response to an influx of Haitian refugees to the Syracuse area and evolved into an after-school program for refugee children from Sudan, Congo, Tanzania, and Cuba. The weekly enrichment program is free to participants, including transportation to campus provided by volunteers, says Rachael Gazdick ’93, assistant director of SOS and a graduate student in the Maxwell School. “A University-community relationship is very important,” Gazdick says. “We have a lot of great resources that can enhance and enrich these kids’ lives.”

The two-hour program includes an hour for children to do homework alongside student mentors and an hour for recreational activities. One week the chemistry honors program presented a magic show, using chemistry as the template. On another occasion, the children and tutors ventured over to UUTV, SU’s student-operated television station, to learn about producing a television show and to create their own program. Other activities have included making ceramic fish, seeing a puppet show and creating puppets, learning about photography, and being taught Japanese and French by SU faculty. “We look at the University as an academic playground for these children,” says Gazdick.

The program has approximately 40 student volunteers who work with the children weekly, building meaningful relationships along the way. “We get to set an example and show these kids what they can grow up to be,” says Noah Boro ’03, an engineering and computer science student who has tutored for two years. “It’s also a release for me because I get to be a kid again. It’s good for the soul.”

Gazdick takes pride in the dedication of the volunteers and participants as well as the program’s success. “Most importantly, we want to provide a loving, nurturing environment,” Gazdick says. “That’s the absolute heart of this program.”

—Kristen Swing

Photos by Steve Sartori; photo, above right, by Susan Kahn