

Wilhelmine Takes the Boston Symphony Home

An Uncommon Name

It's likely you have never met anyone who shares Wilhelmine Mitchell's first name. However, "Wilhelmine" ranked among the top 1,000 most popular baby names for girls between 1900 and 1940. It is a German name from which we also derive the English male version "William."

Wilhelmine's William

As it turns out, Wilhelmine married a William when she was 18 years old.

Their wedding came soon after the attack on Pearl Harbor. Bill enlisted in the Navy and was trained to serve as a firefighter aboard the aircraft carrier USS Enterprise, which was deployed in both Pacific and Atlantic operations. At the conclusion of the war, the Enterprise was assigned the happy task of transporting soldiers who had defeated Germany back to the U.S. Wilhelmine traveled to New York to meet the ship when it docked. Military spouses and families were allowed on board to join a party celebrating their victorious return home.

When Bill passed away in 2013 at the age of 91, he and Wilhelmine had been married for 71 years (longer than many of us have been alive). They created a family legacy that includes four children, nine grandchildren, and twenty-seven great-grandchildren.



Wilhelmine is Willing

The original German meaning of the name Wilhelmine is translated as "willing to protect." Wilhelmine demonstrated her inexhaustible willingness over a span of 50 years by serving as a volunteer for the Auxiliary at Baylor Medical Center in Garland, Texas (a suburb of Dallas). Over those years, she filled a variety of roles for that volunteer organization including Treasurer, and later as their President. When she retired in October of 2014, the Auxiliary calculated that Wilhelmine had devoted a total of 22,000 volunteer hours in service.



A Weekly Date Night at the Symphony

With three sons playing football in school, Wilhelmine's husband was naturally a football fan, watching their games at the field, or the Dallas Cowboys on TV. But because of Wilhelmine's love of classical music, Bill took her on a weekly date night to hear the local symphony. Over time, Bill became a symphony fan as well.

Fans of Fiedler

Wilhelmine and Bill were particularly fond of Arthur Fiedler, the conductor of the Boston Pops Symphony Orchestra. In Fiedler, we find another German connection. His father, an Austrian violinist, moved their family to Germany where Arthur attended the Royal Academy of Music in Berlin from 1911 to 1915. The Fiedlers fled back to Boston at the beginning of World War I.

Wilhelmine and Bill watched TV performances by Fiedler and the Boston Pops as well as a live appearance when that orchestra came to Dallas. They talked about taking a trip to Boston to hear them at the Boston Symphony Hall, but never got the chance to turn that dream into a reality.

A Brookdale Program is Music to her Ears

Wilhelmine is an 11-year resident at the Brookdale Club Hill community in Garland. When her Activity Director, David Sweet, told her about Brookdale's collaboration with the Wish of a Lifetime organization, she grew excited about finally fulfilling her Boston dream.

Sweet coordinated Wilhelmine's trip after carefully checking the calendar and selecting the Boston performance date of October 3, 2014. That day was specifically chosen because Sweet found no football games scheduled for that evening. Wilhelmine wanted her late husband's full attention.

A Majestic Evening is Orchestrated

Wilhelmine marveled when she arrived with her daughter Rose Ann at the Boston Symphony Hall, an architectural wonder built in 1900 as a twin to the Gewandhaus Concert Hall in Leipzig, Germany which was destroyed during WWII.

Their original 100-year-old leather seats were perfectly positioned in the center of the floor section near the front. She could feel Bill's presence with her on this magical night and knew that he would be impressed by the crystal chandeliers, the ornately carved ceiling tiles, and the 16 Greek and Roman statues in the niches of the walls surrounding the audience.

After nearly two hours of being bathed in the music that fulfilled her dream, there was more in store for Wilhelmine. As the hall emptied, she was led to the stage where the symphony conductor gave her the baton he used in that night's performance as well as a piece of the hall's original maple floor from 1900 (replaced in 2006).

She took her husband with her in her heart to the Boston Symphony. And she took a piece of the Boston Symphony home.

Wilhelmine with her daughter Rose Ann at the Boston Symphony Hall.



Gratitude for Her Brookdale Family

Wilhelmine's family is larger than most. In addition to her children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren, she considers the staff and her neighbors at her Brookdale community as a part of her extended family. (After all, who else but family would check the Boston Symphony calendar against the NFL football schedule?)

Brookdale's David Sweet feels the same way about Wilhelmine and her many friends. He says, "I have a job here. But I don't feel like I've worked a day yet."

Wilhelmine's story is connected by threads that stretch from Germany to Boston to Garland, Texas. Those threads link a hospital, a symphony hall, and a retirement community that enriches lives. They are all woven together into the fabric of a life well-lived.

Today, if you walk past the door to Wilhelmine's apartment at Brookdale Club Hill, you might be able to faintly hear the melodies of strings and harmonies of horns that have carried across centuries to now be lifted up to the heavens.

