UC SANTA BARBARA

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With Bells On

Rising 175 feet in the air, looking out on the ocean and mountains beyond and the campus down below, UC Santa Barbara's Storke Tower is a familiar beacon, an iconic landmark imbued with local history and a lot of pride.

Credit some of that to Storke Tower's singular resident: the beloved UCSB carillon, source of those stately chimes announcing the hours. One of only five such instruments in California, it's an elaborate implement of keys, pedals, wires, steel beams, bars and bolts. And a whole lot of bells — 61 of them — ten tons' worth, give or take. Mounted in every corner and on every wall at the top of the tower, the bells give the carillon its distinct sound.

Margo Halsted gives it its power.

"If you have sore hands, you wouldn't want to do this," she said, gearing up to play the Storke Tower carillon one recent morning by outfitting her pinky fingers with protective foam pads. (The side-fisted striking of manual keys and the playing of the two-octaves of foot pedals is physically demanding work. Like a piano, the notes are louder when struck harder.)

"But I really love it — it's fun to play," added Halsted, an associate adjunct professor of music at UCSB, before launching into a lively Spanish folk song to help awaken the campus early on a Monday. "And it's very special to have one. People always remember hearing the carillon. It becomes part of their memories of UCSB."

Bells were first placed in towers and struck on the hour as a means of alerting townspeople to the current time. Carillons themselves originated in the 16th century and evolved in the lowlands of Holland, Belgium and Northern France, where they were something of a status symbol among mercantile towns. The 18th century was considered a “golden age” for carillon production, which then waned around the time of the French Revolution. (In times of war, bells were often melted down to make cannons.)

After World War II came a renewed interest in the ancient instrument, which led to great improvements in their quality and tuning. There are today some 650 traditional carillons in the world — 171 of those are in the U.S., including the few in California. It is a growing art; a handful of new carillons are built each year.

The Storke Tower carillon was installed and dedicated in 1969. Halsted was at the ceremony.

“I wouldn’t have missed the dedication for the world,” she said. “They don’t happen very often.”

At the time Halsted was associate carillonist at Stanford University, where she’d earned a bachelor’s degree in music and a master’s in education, and discovered carillon in the first place (she was originally a pianist and organist). She would go on to earn another master’s — in music this time — from UC Riverside; she later served 10 years there as university carillonist and organist, and a lecturer in music. Halsted then spent 16 years as carillonist and faculty member at the University of Michigan School of Music, retiring as an associate professor emerita in 2003.

In years before, between and since, Halsted has given carillon recitals — more than 400 of them — in countries across the globe. She has published original carillon compositions and articles about the carillon; been an invited speaker at international carillon events; and consulted on carillon installations and renovations for a dozen universities, including Stanford, Cal and Catholic University in Leuven, Belgium. (She is currently consulting on the installation of a carillon at Salisbury University in Maryland.)

Throughout it all, her mind would still wander fondly to the Storke Tower carillon. She spent a year as a visiting scholar and carillonist at UCSB in the late 1990s, during a sabbatical leave from Michigan. In 2008 she returned for good.

Halsted plays on campus most Monday mornings during the academic year, every Earth Day, before each of the university's annual commencement exercises in June and for various special events. She also facilitates regular carillon recitals for her students.

"Our department is fortunate to offer instruction in carillon as part of our mission to provide a diverse and challenging course of study for our music students," said Jill Felber, professor of flute and chair of music at UCSB. "Margo's commitment to improve carillon practice and performance is both extraordinary and inspiring."

That commitment is what motivated Halsted earlier this year to commission and donate to the department a custom-made carillon practice keyboard. A near replica of the one in the tower — minus the gigantic bells, of course — it enables an easier transition from rehearsal to performance. (When your instrument lives at the top of a tower, having a ground- level practice version is essential.)

Halsted's gift is a physical reminder of her ongoing generosity to all things carillon at UCSB, where she's not only the instrument's principal player, but also its primary caretaker. (She's been known to climb a ladder to adjust a bell if its mechanism seems to be malfunctioning.)

With pride and a warm smile, she happily takes a curious visitor up the tower — eager to share her affection for the storied apparatus that's been her enduring muse.

"It's a very special instrument," Halsted said. "Every carillon needs someone to love it. And I guess I'm that person for this one."

About UC Santa Barbara

The University of California, Santa Barbara is a leading research institution that also provides a comprehensive liberal arts learning experience. Our academic community of faculty, students, and staff is characterized by a culture of interdisciplinary collaboration that is responsive to the needs of our multicultural and global society. All of this takes place within a living and learning environment like no other, as we draw inspiration from the beauty and resources of our extraordinary location at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.