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## Monessen woman makes church music in New York

By Ron Paglia  
FOR THE TRIBUNE-REVIEW  
Sunday, August 9, 2009



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Music has always been a major part of life for Karen L. Summers.

That fact is certainly emphasized in the Monessen native's multiple roles with church choirs in Rochester, N.Y.

"As a young girl, I took piano lessons from Clara Hart Miller in Monessen," said Summers, a retired educator. "In high school, I belonged to the Glee Club, so, yes, I have had a love for and respect of music for many, many years."

Miller was a well-known teacher of voice and music in Monessen for many years and her students were featured in community and school programs. She also was director of the choir at First Presbyterian Church of Monessen.

Summers, a 1961 graduate of Monessen High School, perpetuates her mentor's leadership role as director of music at Mount Vernon Baptist Church, one of the largest African American congregations in Rochester, and as executive music director of Akoma, an African American women's gospel choir.

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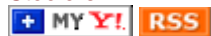
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"It's my responsibility to coordinate music for all services at Mount Vernon," Summers said. "Of the seven different choirs at the church, I play for five of them -- Buds of Promise Children's Choir, Youth Choir, Voices of Praise Young Adult Choir, Senior Choir, and the Celestial Choir. I also must see that the instruments -- piano, organ, electric keyboard -- are kept in working order."

She also plays for most weddings and funerals at the church.

"It's a rather busy schedule at times, but I enjoy it," Summers said.

As executive music director of Akoma, Summers guides a community choir made up of women from churches throughout the Rochester area.

"We do an annual concert at which we present scholarships to deserving young women in the Rochester community," Summers said. "This group performed most recently with the Rochester Philharmonic Orchestra, and we have also done concerts at Roberts Wesleyan College, Geneseo College and Hobart College."

She also noted that the group has its own Web site, [www.akoma.org](http://www.akoma.org).

Summers, 66, doesn't limit her involvement with music to the keyboards or directing choirs. She also has sung at Carnegie Hall in New York City as a member of the Charles Walker Chorale, which performed with the Rochester Philharmonic Orchestra. The group has appeared with such notables as Odetta, Mahalia Jackson and Clark Terry.

Her experience in music also helped Summers during a 32-year career as an elementary school teacher.

She graduated from Indiana State College (now Indiana University of Pennsylvania) in 1965 with a degree in elementary education and accepted a teaching job in Rochester. She retired in 1996.

"My brother, Felton, was living and working in Rochester at the time, so I thought that was a great opportunity to begin my career there," Summers said. "And teaching salaries in New York were much better than in Pennsylvania at the time."

Summers is one of three children born to the late Felton R. Brown Sr. and Ruby Christine Daniels Brown. Her older brother, Felton R. Brown Jr., is retired after careers in corporate America and in education and lives in Germantown, Tenn. Their younger brother, Carlton C. Brown, retired after a 20-year career in the U.S. Air Force and lives in Yorktown, Va., where he works in the security business.

The siblings' father, a native of North Belle Vernon, was a legendary athlete in the Mon Valley. He also was recognized as a community leader and was the first African American to serve on the Monessen School Board.

"As a young girl, I knew he was a coach for Midget League football," Summers said. "But I didn't become fully aware of the impact he had on so many people until

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I became an adult. It is always with a deep sense of gratitude that I hear his role as a mentor to young men in sports and, more importantly, in life."

Summers' mother was a native of Georgia who grew up in North Charleroi and was well known for her talents as a designer and creator of clothes.

"My parents had a big influence on my life, especially my mother," Summers said. "She had the most common sense of anyone I have ever known and always gave the best advice, even though I did not always follow it."

Her closest friend in high school was Suzanne Frezzell, who also lives in Rochester. Others who shared in typical teenager activities of that era were Alma Ingram, Gene Darryl Hill, Barbara Booker, Marie Payne and Ernestine Watkins.

Summers was married briefly to Baron Summers.

"We dated in the 1960s, but (Baron) went to the service and I went away to college and we lost track of each other until 1999," she said. "We reconnected and married in March of 2000. Unfortunately, he died in December of 2000."

### **Mon Valley connections**

Summers attends her high school class reunions and stays in touch with some classmates. She also keeps up with what's going on in her hometown and the Mon Valley through her uncle and aunt, Edgar and Gladys Isbell of Charleroi. Edgar is the brother of Summers' mother.

Summers, her brothers and their aunt and uncle enjoyed a special reunion in June when Felton R. Brown Sr. was inducted into the Mid Mon Valley All Sports Hall of Fame.

"That was a very special evening for all of us," Summers said of the induction ceremonies and banquet at the Willow Room in Rostraver Township. In addition to her activities with the church chorale groups, Summers enjoys traveling and bowling.

Her brother, Carlton, likes to kid that Summers "has more (bowling) trophies than anyone I know. She can make those pins fly."

"I'm just an average bowler who just happened to be on some good teams," Summers said. As for traveling, Summers has been to Spain, Israel, Hawaii, Jamaica, the Bahamas, St. Thomas, VI, Trinidad, Tobago, Aruba, Curacao, Balize, St. Kitts, St. Lucia, Antigua, Bermuda and St. Martin.

Those journeys and living elsewhere for more than 45 years notwithstanding, Summers has never lost her sense of hometown pride in Monessen.

"It's important and imperative that you never forget where you came from," she said.

"Growing up in Monessen with loving and wise parents provided me with so many values that have remained with me throughout my life. I learned about family, hard