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Published on Aspen Daily News Online (<http://www.aspendailynews.com>)

Oden honored for 30-year contribution to music festival

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Special to the Aspen Daily News

The Aspen Music Festival's 2010 season ended Sunday with the dissonance and dramatic percussion of Stravinsky's Rite of Spring, marking with a flourish the last day of one of the festival's longest-serving volunteers.

Thirty-plus-year volunteer Nancy Oden was honored by music festival officials just before the start of the Aspen Festival Orchestra performance on Sunday afternoon. Attention was directed toward Oden, who was sitting toward the back of the Benedict Music Tent, and fellow volunteers lined up to give her flowers as the audience cheered.

She is retiring from her position as volunteer coordinator and manager of the lemonade stand.

Oden was already a volunteer for the music festival in the 1980s when she was asked to take over the lemonade stand after its creator, Fred Lane, fell ill. The assignment was supposed to be temporary until Lane's health improved, but as his health continued to deteriorate, Oden became the permanent manager of the stand.

"When Fred started the stand, it was very small and had nothing modern," said Oden, and other unwelcome critters out. "He would call people to volunteer each week. [The festival] wasn't as big, and didn't have as many shows, so it was manageable."

The original lemonade stand had fencing to keep bears and other unwelcome critters out. Bianca Hooker, a volunteer who has been working under Oden since 1986, called it "very funky."

As the festival grew, the lemonade stand updated its look and products. The current stand was built in 1999 at the same time the Benedict Music Tent was built. Currently, volunteers sell baked goods from Paradise Bakery, which gives the festival a discount on their products.

"Life changed and [the festival] got bigger, and we got a bigger lemonade stand," said Oden.

In her years of service, Nancy has been responsible for the lemonade stand's accounting, keeping stock of the food, and organizing the stand's 100-plus volunteers.

Oden moved to Aspen in 1964 and married the now deceased Dr. Robert Oden, founder of Aspen Orthopaedic Associates. She is a lifetime trustee of the Aspen Music Festival and School and both she and Dr. Oden have been honored in the Aspen Hall of Fame.

"They both have really been wonderful contributors to the community," said Hooker, "and I'm glad Nancy's getting recognition."

"She is an unsung hero," said her daughter Liz Oden, "She stuck with it, and is one of the reasons the festival is as big as it is."

Oden contributes the stand's success to her volunteers and the friendships that have been created as a result.

Now that she is retiring, the question on everybody's mind is who will take her place, which has yet to be decided, said Oden.

"I don't know who it will be. There is no obvious [successor]," said Oden, "It needs to be somebody who lives in Aspen and they need to be around for the money aspect and the supply aspect."

According to Oden, most of the volunteers are either in Aspen just for the summer, or live outside of town.

"It does make it hard because people don't want to commute back and forth [from downvalley] and it's understandable," Oden conceded, "I don't know what the answer is."

As for her hopes for the stand's future, Oden hopes a new person who will run the stand will step forward and she would like to see more young people volunteer.

"We have a huge contingent of volunteers over [the age of] 85, which is mind-bogglingly wonderful," said Oden, "But one day I hope to see more young people getting involved."

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Nancy Oden holds flowers given to her by fellow volunteers during a recognition ceremony before the final performance of the 2010 Aspen Music Festival and School's season. Oden, who has been a volunteer coordinator and manager of the lemonade stand at the festival for the past 30 years, is retiring after this season.

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