

HOOSIER WOMEN AT WORK

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“I Knew My Limits:” An Oral History of Elizabeth Cullity of the South Bend Symphony Orchestra

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This paper will present part of the oral history of Elizabeth Cullity who served as manager of the South Bend Symphony Orchestra from 1959 -1985. Even though Elizabeth (Liz) Cullity uses the statement “I knew my limits” to describe her choice to teach music over performing, her life can be defined as breaking limits. Liz’s interest in music first appeared at a young age, when she began piano lessons at the age of five. As a young girl, instead of playing hide and seek or other childhood games, Liz played orchestra, pretending her violin case was a cello so she could have a larger strings section. Liz’s limit-breaking first began when in fifth grade she was asked to join the high school band, which she continued in through junior high and high schools.

After graduating from Ball State University, Liz came to South Bend in 1946 where she taught vocal music for fourth through ninth grades. She continued teaching at Jefferson until marrying in 1953. In 1959, at a time when most middle class married women were full-time homemakers, Liz was asked to step in as manager of the South Bend Symphony Orchestra. Although Liz initially balked at the suggestion as being beyond her limits, after being asked again by Ella Morris, she agreed because, “you can’t say no to Mrs. Morris.” Liz continued at the symphony for 26 years.

When Liz first began managing she was the only staff member and did everything from keeping the books to hiring conductors to mailing off season tickets – all from her dining room table “office.” During her tenure Liz helped the symphony grow to its current form with multiple employees and an office downtown.

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