

Little Church on the Hill: Meet the Verdus

By Jeanne Cotroneo Darrow
and Lauren Fitzgerald

Around the bend and up a small hill is a place called Shenandoah. At its center is the circa 1834 Bethel Baptist Church, at 511 Shenandoah Road in Hopewell Junction. Its pastor, Ralph Verdu, has been leading this part of our community in worship and fellowship for the last 30 years. It was 1990 when he was called to the church and moved from Pennsylvania into a modest home across the street with his wife Donna and infant son Ralph—and never left. It's where they raised their five children. Next door is Bethel Christian Academy, where Ralph is headmaster and no more than 20 students a year are taught by the all-volunteer staff.

Ralph grew up in Pittsburgh with his two brothers and two sisters. He graduated high school during the Vietnam War, just after the draft had ended. He started college, studying to become a teacher, like his siblings, but soon realized teaching wasn't for him. So he enlisted in the Navy and spent six years as an electronics technician at the Naval Station Great Lakes in Illinois. He then trained in San Diego and Georgia before being stationed for two years in Greece. "I was the poster boy for 'It's not just a job; it's an adventure!'," he laughs.

There, he met a group of young missionaries—street evangelists who would hang out with the soldiers. Although disinterested in the group's religious purpose, Ralph enjoyed their company. Before leaving town, the preacher challenged Ralph to examine his faith. That sparked something in Ralph, who, a few weeks later, led a Bible study on base.

A HIGHER CALLING

When the Navy wanted to promote him, Ralph realized he had a different calling. He left the service and enrolled in Baptist Bible College (now Clarks Summit University) near Scranton. That's where, in 1983, he met Donna, a fellow student who grew up with her brother near Allentown and was studying elementary education. Donna, a piano player, remembers having strong faith even as a child, twirling around the living room saying, "I want to be a missionary nurse who plays the piano!"

Ralph graduated the seminary program in 1984, and he and Donna married a year later. Ralph began a graduate program while working full-time doing dorm maintenance before taking an 11-month internship in Detroit, where son, Ralph, was born in 1989. The next year, Ralph was called to Bethel Baptist, and the couple moved again.

SUPPORT IN SHENANDOAH

Three decades later, he still loves living there and is grateful for the "small but very active" congregation of around 30 members, including several firemen and nurses. "We're very much a community-oriented church with a desire to reach more people." He ministers and offers counseling to anyone in need.

Ralph and Donna experienced firsthand the meaning of a supportive community when they lost their fourth child, Joel, at only 14 months old. He did not survive his medical emergency of a twisted intestine. They reflect on those difficult days and the



The historic Bethel Baptist Church, where Ralph Verdu has been pastor for 30 years, has a "small but very active" congregation. "We're very much a community-oriented church with a desire to reach more people."

role reversals as "others ministered to us" and cannot imagine getting through them without their faith. That experience has helped them in counseling other grieving parents. "Life isn't always easy," says Ralph. "There are answers, but no simple ones."

That's something all of the Verdu children have learned—in life and from Dad and Mom, who homeschooled each of them. "My children were my students, my number-one disciples," says Donna, who, using a Bible-based curriculum, made sure they were well rounded and could discover their own gifts. All were required to play an instrument, and all but one played soccer.

Donna also took in and cared for her ill mother. Bedridden from 2003 until she died in 2018, she lived in their first-floor study off the living room, where Donna did her schooling and taught piano. “The kids helped care for her, which I think taught them to enjoy older people,” she says.

THE VERDU CLAN

Oldest son Ralph is now 30 and lives in Pittsburgh with his wife. Caleb, 18, is the youngest—and only child still at home. Philip, 28, works and lives on nearby Silver Ledge Farm. An artist with a degree in studio art, he often paints at work and does building portraits.

Daughter Becky, 26, a piano player, is married and lives in Tennessee. She recently quit her job as she battles chronic Lyme disease but is “growing in her faith through some difficult challenges,” says Donna. Kimberly, 20, a vocalist and guitarist, writes music. She is studying to be a TESOL teacher (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) and recently got engaged.

Caleb is a bugler for the **American Legion Manny Bacon Post 1758 in Hopewell Junction** and, as a Cadet Second Lieutenant in the Civil Air Patrol, coordinates the efforts of 40 teens in the Dutchess County Cadet Squadron. This fall, the U.S. Air Force Reserve Officer and piano tuner will study engineering at Bob Jones University in South Carolina, no surprise given his passion for K’NEX. Taking up the living-



Donna and Ralph Verdu with son, Philip, who lives and works on a nearby farm.



Photos by Patii Hale

The Verdus loved raising their children in the quaint home across from the church.

room corner is a five-by-three-foot model train engine that took him 40 hours to complete.

With Pepper, their green-eyed black cat, curled up on her lap, Donna reflects on how her grown babies all work hard, are active in their churches, and growing in their faith. She continues to tutor neighborhood kids, hold a weekly children’s Bible club, and teach piano, which has led to “wonderful ministry opportunities” with young women.

Ralph, who is also the chaplain at several local nursing homes, continues to volunteer with the Civil Air Patrol, Friends of the East Fishkill Community Library, and at the polls on election day. With 30 years at one organization, he knows eventually it will be time for someone new but has no plans to say goodbye to Bethel Baptist. After a long pause to answer if a lure would ever be possible, he says “a calling from a church closer to my parents,” who just celebrated their 68th anniversary. For now, he is content. “I feel like a rich man,” he smiles, “because we are helping others every day.” ♦

We would like to thank THE DARLIND COMPANIES for bringing you this cover story.