



Family just amateur singers, but Cubs' honors for Donahue definitely on-key

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Posted Wednesday, May 7th, 2014*

Stage fright was not an option during mid-afternoon on Saturday, May 3, for Mary Beth and Marge Manning, and Barbara Ernesti.

“When I looked out over the crowd, I thought there’s no use being nervous because nobody’s going to see us after the event,” said Mary Beth Manning. “I’ll just do the best I could.

“I was a little intimidated, of course, in a way. But then I thought it’s for Aunt Midge. I was going to go full-steam ahead.”

Such were the emotions of the three sisters from Huntley, Ill., 50 miles northwest of Chicago – and the surviving family of “Aunt Midge,” formal name Margaret Donahue. The trio was about to sing “Take Me Out to the Ballgame” in the cramped Wrigley Field home TV booth to honor their aunt, baseball’s pioneering female executive in the 1920s. Even if the vocal result was off-key, the fate of many seventh-inning singers, the symbolism was melodic.

The Mannings and Ernesti sought to have their aunt recognized by the Cubs by writing a letter and sending historical materials to Cubs Chairman Tom Ricketts in the spring of 2013. Donahue, part of a dynamic Cubs management line that included team president William L. Veeck, Jr. and son Bill Veeck, had almost been lost to history after retiring as a vice president in 1958, 20 years before her death.

The loyal nieces, who fondly recall youthful outings to Wrigley Field with Donahue, felt a sense of mission accomplished that did not last years and have a lot of frustrating twists and turns.



Margaret Donahue's three nieces sing in the seventh inning at Wrigley Field on May 3, the day set aside to honor the pioneering female Cubs executive (Photo by Steve Green/Chicago Cubs).

Within months of their first contact with Ricketts, a key Cubs official came out to Huntley to meet them and research Donahue. The Cubs included recognition of Donahue as part of Wrigley Field's 100th anniversary celebration his year. The Donahue honor came during a homestand recalling the 1920s, "Midge's" first era of prominence.

And doubling the sisters' pleasure, to paraphrase the old Wrigley gum promotion line dating back to Donahue's days, is the knowledge a new park near Wrigley Field to be named for Donahue is in the final planning stages.

"We're just happy she'll be now remembered being part of baseball becoming a very popular sport, and a business," said Ernesti.

Donahue, Veeck father-and-son built up Wrigley presentation

The honors in and outside Wrigley Field for Donahue are welcome, and overdue. Between her work and that of the Veecks father-and-son, much of the physical presentation of 1060 W. Addison St. is traced back to that trio.

William Veeck, Sr. supervised the double-decking of the ballpark in the 1920s, while Bill Veeck spearheaded the building of the bleachers and manual scoreboard with the installation of the ivy in 1937. Donahue helped the elder Veeck with the implementation of the hyper-popular Ladies Days while coming up with the concepts of selling season tickets and all tickets off-site, at Western Union offices.

Donahue, who also grew up in Huntley and never married, was a doting aunt. Mary Beth Manning and Ernesti lived with her and her brothers during college. All the sisters saw Donahue at work during outings at Wrigley Field. Mary Beth Manning even worked at the Wrigley Company downtown as a teenager.



From left: Barbara Ernesti, Mary Beth Manning and Marge Manning gather to recall the storied life of their "Aunt Midge."

The family has retained Donahue's keepsakes, including her lifetime gold pass to attend major-league games and letters of commendation from the likes of Philip K. Wrigley. That collection reeled in the Cubs when it was inspected in the late summer of 2013. Mary Beth Manning figures one specific Ricketts sibling was behind the interest the team took in Donahue.

"I think Laura Ricketts kind of identified with my aunt in a way," she said. "She was one female amid three brothers. She could understand that Midge had to accomplish the things she did in a man's world. In that day and age, that was pretty unusual."

Julian Green, the Cubs' vice president of communications/community affairs, said Donahue's contributions to the Cubs and baseball were recognized organization-wide as planning began for the Wrigley Field centennial.

When the *Chicago Tribune's* John Owens produced a historical video on Donahue in 2013, Laura Ricketts' comments about Donahue were included.

"In the summer (of 2013), we got a call from Lydia," said Marge Manning. She referred to Lydia Wahlke, the Cubs' assistant general counsel who also

coordinates the collecting of team memorabilia. Wahlke and Cubs historian Ed Hartig came to Manning's house for lunch with the sisters and looked over the keepsakes.

"That started the ball rolling with them," said Marge Manning.

Vintage documents found in Cubs' offices

Wahlke had her own mini-Donahue collection at the Cubs' offices. "Lydia said when they went through old papers, they found things she had written or records she had left with her named signed to it," said Ernesti.

One particularly interesting Donahue letter Wahlke discovered had been sent to season ticket-holders concerning the 1945 World Series, according to Green.

"Right now, preserving those documents are key," he added. "Even with a 100-plus-year-old history as an organization, prior to the Ricketts family assuming control of the team, there wasn't really an organized program to archive some of the history. What the family found coming in was a lot of artifacts and things that we believe would be important to preserving the history, we just didn't have in our possession.

"We'll be looking for ways to see how we can put those materials on display."

Wrapping up the visit, Wahlke asked the sisters what they'd really like as far as a permanent remembrance of Donahue.

"I would think it would nice if there'd be a plaque or picture or something of her in the office so that people work in the office would be aware of what she had done there," Ernesti said. "This is something that would be remembered by the people in the office."



Margaret Donahue and William Veeck look over a torrent of ticket orders for the 1929 World Series at Wrigley Field.

Green said the Cubs do possess several photos of Donahue. How they'll be displayed will obviously be connected to the renovation process.

"We're going to be building a new office building and restoring the ballpark, and I think there will be a number of ways to celebrate that history," Green said.

The timing of the visit was perfect in the summer prior to Wrigley's centennial

"They said we'll do something about it next year in the anniversary year," Ernesti recalled.

The sisters did not hear anything throughout the off-season. Then, nearly two weeks before the May 3 game, they received a call from Kaitlyn August, the Cubs' coordinator of entertainment and event production, inviting them to sing on that date.

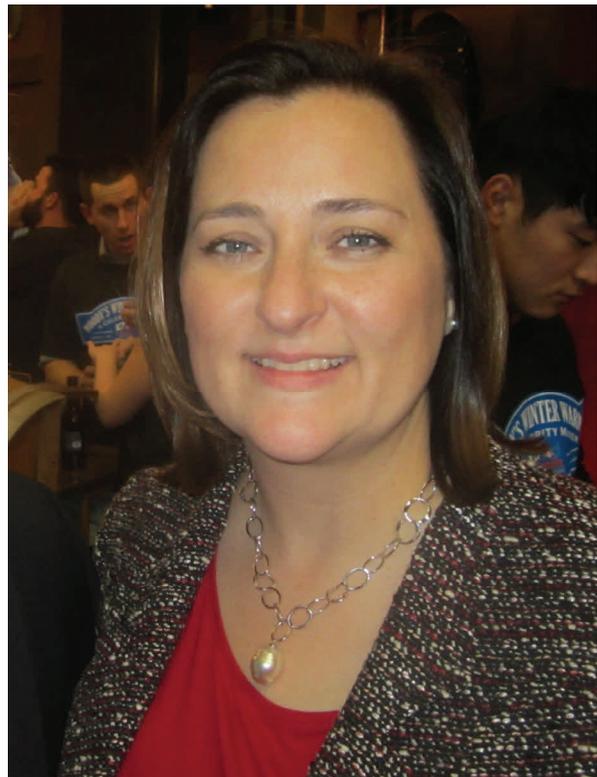
Spreading the word at a family wedding, the sisters were bombarded with requests from family and friends to attend the game. Eventually a group of 33 was assembled. The sisters got eight complimentary tickets for seats in the terrace reserved section in the lower deck. They booked a bus that departed from Huntley's Diecke Park.

Four generations attend game

Ernesti led four generations in her family in the group. Daughter Jeanne Saha was present. Traveling in from Ottawa, Ontario were granddaughter Anita Vucetic and great-granddaughter Marina, age 18 months.

"Kaitlyn picked us up before the fifth inning," said Marge Manning. "We practiced once with (organist) Gary Pressy. We had a fun time. Leading up to it, we were all a little nervous. But when we got in there and got going, we were fine. I think we did fairly well maintaining some semblance of the melody."

The sisters then departed without further on-air comments. They did not do interviews with the announcers, but management gave radio voice Pat Hughes and TV play-by-play man Len Kasper biographical information about Donahue to read a couple of innings before the singalong. The sisters also were acknowledged on the public-address system earlier in the game.



Cubs co-owner Laura Ricketts has been credited by Margaret Donahue's family as helping spur recognition of the late team official, who worked for the Cubs for 39 years.

“It was very nicely promoted,” said Marge Manning. “It was so nice for the Ricketts to acknowledge (Donahue).”

The sisters were surprised when fans in the sections next to their own stood and cheered when they returned to their seats. Afterward, the entire family group went on the field to take a photo. There were too many to accommodate in foul territory pre-game.

The Mannings and Ernesti will make a return trip to the area for more family business. A new park named after Donahue is planned for 1200 W. School St. with help from Cubs Charities, whom Laura Ricketts heads. The philanthropic arm of the team is contributing \$1 million of the \$1.3 million cost of the park.

The Cubs met with the Park District for a number of months on the funding and design of the park. Eventually, the right historical name for the property was decided upon, said Kam Buckner, the team's manager of government and neighborhood relations. Timing was again right with the Wrigley centennial.

Council vote expects to favor Donahue Park

Jackie Earley, president of the School Street Park Advisory Council, told Marge Manning her board likely will formally approve the naming of the park after Donahue on May 15. The Chicago Park District wants more parks named after Chicago women. Ald. Tom Tunney (44th) also has to sign off on the naming, but that act is expected to be completed.

“They wanted to name it after someone who had an impact on the area,” said Marge Manning.

The Margaret Donahue Park will feature a bronze plaque recalling her work and a replica of the trademark Wrigley Field marquee at its entrance. Murals will be designed by artist David Lee Csicsko.

“I can't think of anything nicer,” Mary Beth Manning said of the park. “We'll be there (at the groundbreaking) with all our bells on.”

While at the park, the sisters will still have a glow in their minds about their singalong. More importantly in this tough Cubs era, they'll always remember the final result.

“The Cubs won, and that's good,” Mary Beth Manning said.