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Franco-Americans say 'Merci' to scholar Giguere

By Mike Boehmer
Sun staff writer 9/29/86

For many years, Lewiston native Madeleine D. Giguere studiously went about her work helping people better understand Franco-Americans.

Giguere spent countless hours in relative obscurity, pulling together information about her ancestors for publication. She transcribed volumes of data about the people into English, taught hundreds of college students about them, and devoted much time to Franco-American organizations.

More than 150 people Sunday showed Giguere appreciation for the labor in her hometown. She was honored in serenade, "sante" and speech at the annual Action for Franco-Americans of the Northeast recognition dinner at Lewiston's Ramada Inn.

"She has been quietly doing her thing for so long," said Suzanne Hatfield, a former student of Giguere's at the University of Southern Maine who came to Lewiston from Yarmouth. "She deserves recognition."

"I'm very delighted," said Gi-

guere, during the three-hour tribute. "I think it is unusual to have your work recognized, particularly when it isn't world shattering. It just pertains to a small group of people."

Interest in that group has grown, mainly because of Francophones like Giguere, according to Paul M. Pare of Action for Franco-Americans in the Northeast.

In 1972, she started a first-of-its-kind course at USM, "The Sociology of Franco-Americans."

Jeanne d'Arc St. Pierre, a Lewiston native from Connecticut, said the course had a dramatic effect on her views.

"I had tried to shorten my name to Jean," said St. Pierre, noting that she "probably unconsciously" wanted to anglicize her Franco-American name. "But she influenced me to reaffirm my roots."

Giguere "always has been dedicated to promoting the Franco-American heritage," said Helen L. Greenwood, USM provost.

Lewiston Mayor Alfred A. Plourde called Giguere "a role model for all young Franco-Americans in our city and our state."

"Her demographic research has



Madeleine D. Giguere

provided for the first time scientifically-sound information on the numerical strength of Franco-Americans as well as insights into their social and family patterns," according to ActFANE's program for the night's tribute. "This new body of

knowledge has been a key factor in the creation of several federally-funded programs for Franco-Americans throughout New England."

Giguere succeeded in having the census bureau collect and report data on these and other ethnic groups. "The Franco-American Overviews," which she edited for the National Materials Development Center, is employed widely by colleges. At the request of the U.S. State Department, she is now conducting a study on language maintenance among Franco-Americans and the Irish with researchers from Galway University in Ireland.

"Compared to other ethnic groups like the Italians, or the Jews, or the Hispanics — where you have a great body of knowledge — everything is to be done for the Franco-Americans," she said. "There is always a contribution to be made, no matter how small the group."

General understanding of the group was slow to come partly because in the Northeast "there wasn't a great interest in the ethnicity," Giguere said.

"And the French (Americans) kept the French language for a long

time after they came here," she continued. "The bulk of the immigrants came from Canada between 1870 and 1920. They continued to write in French through the mid-'40s. I think consequently (history about them was) much less accessible for the non-French reading public."

Giguere compiled much of that information in the English overview text in the late 1970s.

"Compared to other groups, it's thin," she said. "It's two volumes, whereas if you looked at the Italians, you'd have a library."

Interest in the culture had "died down" in the 1950s and 1960s, but there was a revival in the next two decades, Giguere said.

"It may have been that there was just a general interest in ethnicity," she continued. "Roots," for instance, was a good example of that among the blacks. And people have become interested in genealogy, and looking for their roots. I think there is a search for one's origins."

Franco-Americans have overcome negative feelings about their ancestry, she said, adding that other people are treating them with more respect.

"It seems that it is very easy to get examples of where they have been discriminated against," Giguere said. "But I don't think it is anywhere near the intensity that other groups like the Hispanics are feeling."

Pare said his organization voted unanimously to honor Giguere.

"We feel her work has had an impact on a large scale," he said, "as opposed to a lot of people who do a lot of wonderful things, but in their own little community. That's great. But what we're trying to do is recognize somebody who on a large scale help."

"I've done this work, which I think is important, because I thought it had to be done," Giguere said. "I also know that it wasn't something (that would grab the attention of a wide audience). Numbers turn people off. I did it because I thought it was important."

Proceeds from the tribute will go toward research scholarships to be administered by the Franco-American Center in Orono.

"I plan to serve as a research person," Giguere said.