When she took on the piano, Nancy was raising a son and working as a secretary at Westinghouse Electric Corporation, but she practiced four hours a day. “Of course, you have to learn your scales, your chords, inversions. [My teacher] had me doing all that, studying out of three or four books. He took me through the cycle of fourths, through the major scales, the natural minor, harmonic minor, and melodic minor scales.

“My son told me, ‘Mom, I’ll be so glad when you can play a song.’ It was a year before I played a melody. When he came home on leave from the service, I had an electric piano in layaway. He gave me a check and said, ‘Mom, go down and get that piano.’ It was my first keyboard.

“It was really hard, learning to play jazz,” said Nancy. She had played the flute throughout public school, but the piano was a new challenge. “I had great teachers, Dr. James Johnson and Frank Conimundo.” Dr. Johnson and his wife, Pam, are the founders of the Afro American Music Institute, a music school in Homewood. Frank Conimundo still teaches and plays piano at many venues.

When Nancy had an opportunity to take her career to the big-time, she chose to keep it local. That moment came after 10 years of playing, when she opened for vocalist Dakota Staton at the Manchester Craftsmen’s Guild. “My name spread all over. I even got a call from Vegas. The publicity came too soon, and it frightened me. I quit playing for three months.”

But not forever. She resumed playing locally and enjoys the generous spirit that sets the tone among local musicians. “They always, the local guys, including Roger Humphries, always ask me to sit in.”

“It’s serious jazz time on Saturday afternoons at the Jazz Workshop, when Nancy joins local musicians in the auditorium of the library to play music for the sheer joy of it, and to pass on the jazz tradition. To Dr. E. Ron Horton, who leads the band, it’s all about the learning. He pointed out that even the leadership is settled on someone who can benefit from the experience of directing the band. “The ensemble provides an opportunity to learn jazz in a hands-on manner. If you are an amateur musician, you can’t always get to perform with other musicians.” In the workshop, a young person might be playing alongside Al Dowe, one of Pittsburgh’s legends. Horton, whose doctorate is in ethnomusicology (the study of music in its social context), said...
the group is learning, yes, but always working toward a good performance. “And the only way to get there is to practice.”

Dr. Kenan Foley, who plays drums for the band, explained what makes a jazz band unique: “The band leader should be able to call on anyone in the band to do a solo improvisation.” The improvisation is within a structured chord progression, or it might not be, and that’s called “going outside,” according to Nancy Taylor. “That’s when you get the ‘spacey’ music,” she said.

The Workshop was formed in 1973 by Harold Young, a local musician. It was a response to the loss of the Local Musicians Unions #471, located in the Hill District, a place where professional musicians gathered to develop the potential of young African American students. Forced to integrate with Local #60 located in downtown Pittsburgh, the group lost its space.

Missing the collegiality of the group, Young established the Musicians Club, located on Center Avenue in Wilkinsburg. Meetings and seminars are held at this location, but as its mission of passing along the jazz tradition grew, Young contacted the Homewood Library with the idea of using its space, with rooms suitable for classes and an auditorium with fine acoustics.

“When I began to play,” said Nancy, “I wanted to be the baddest piano player in the world. I told Dr. Johnson that I was going to be better than him. That was before I realized that jazz music is infinite. It goes deep within my soul and spirit and brings out the music. It’s the feeling that comes out.” Humility, acquired through those hours of practice, has served Nancy Taylor well. “What I like about Nancy,” said Horton, “is that she is an excellent adult learner. Most adults are motivated by some great player, maybe Oscar Peterson, and want to sound like that in six months. Nancy knows that learning jazz is a long-term commitment. There will always be a place for Nancy in the workshop.”

Bette McDevitt is a freelance writer and longtime contributor to Western Pennsylvania History.

Nancy plays with trombonists Al Dave and Sonny Bayko, and trumpet players Dr. E. Ron Horton and Ron Jones.

The Jazz Workshop has free concerts outside of the library every summer during the months of June and July called “Jazz on the Steps Series.” There will be a concert in the auditorium on Saturday, June 28, at 1:30 p.m.