

LEGACY

Illuminating the Past, Informing the Present, Inspiring the Future



GENEVA
ESCHWEILER

Geneva Eschweiler is a graduate of St. Olaf College, and holds a Masters Degree in Voice Performance from Moorhead State University. Her teaching career, prior to moving to the Twin Cities in 1993, included four years in the elementary/junior high music departments in the Fergus Falls Public Schools, and thirty-one years as Director of Choral Activities and Voice Instructor at Fergus Falls Community College (FFCC).

In 1990, the Minnesota American Choral Directors Association named Eschweiler the recipient of their highest honor – the F. Melius Christiansen Memorial Award – for her contributions to choral art in the state of Minnesota. In 2003, she was named one of three outstanding Minnesota Community College educators to be honored by the Minnesota State Legislature. A member of the National Association of Teachers of Sing-

ing, she has coached many finalists in MN-NATS Auditions, as well as high school winners in the Thursday Musical Scholarship Contests. At the Winner's Recital in March 2003, Thursday Musical recognized Eschweiler as Teacher of Distinction for her excellence in preparation of and inspiration to young singers.

Ms. Eschweiler served as Executive Secretary of the MN-ACDA Board of Directors for several years. She was on the Board of Thursday Musical from 1994-2001, first as membership chairman for four years, followed by Student Section Committee involvement for three years. She was one of the five founders of the ACDA-MN F. Melius Christiansen Endowment Committee. She also served on the board of The Singers – Minnesota Choral Artists from 2005-2009. After her retirement from FFCC in 1993, Eschweiler moved to Minneapolis where she opened The Music Loft – Geneva Eschweiler Voice Studio, where she currently teaches thirty-four students. For the past seven years, she has been Music Director of the Music Loft Summer Opera Immersion Playshop in collaboration with Artistic Director, Sarah Marie Eschweiler.

Editor's Note: The following is a condensed transcript of an interview with Geneva held in Fridley, MN, on January 13, 2010.

Star of the North: How did you get hooked on music?

Geneva Eschweiler: Oh! I was hooked from the day I was born! My dad told me that during the depression he provided piano lessons for my older sister. As soon as I could toddle, I was off listening to my sister's lessons and came home able to play everything Mrs. Smith taught her. Dad said to Mrs. Smith, "Well, you might as well take Geneva, too!" I was too young to remember how old I was – I just started taking piano lessons. We moved



Geneva leads one of her signature vocal clinics.

to Ortonville when I was in the fourth grade, and a year later, I was invited to be the pianist for the Methodist Church. My dad became ill, and Gus Kleinschmidt (a bass in the Church Choir) helped pay for my lessons for several years.

SotN: Wow! What a gift!

GE: Yes. You know, my dad was a farmer. He had a lot of drive. When the crops didn't come in, he planted and sold potatoes. He was very proud and was going to get us through those tough days. I did not grow up in a home surrounded by classical music. But we did listen to the NY Philharmonic Sunday broadcasts on our radio. Live music happened when my Dad organized the neighbors to play their instruments together in our home. I'd hear those farmers coming in after their chores were done, tuning up. I'd get out of bed, rush downstairs, join their piano player on the bench, and feel overjoyed to be in the middle of all that raucous sound – live music!

SotN: What a clear commitment from your father.

GE: And my mother! My mother was the one who would say, "Let her follow her dreams, Benny." He thought I'd make a better living as a nurse or a secretary. Once I had visited St. Olaf, however, my mother saw that music was where my heart probably would lead me. She was right! I did get a music major, but I also majored in English. I was prepared to do something other than music after I graduated from St. Olaf.

SotN: How did you start singing?

GE: My sisters and I discovered we could make three-part harmony when we got stuck in the car in the rain. I could find the second soprano part, my younger sister could hear the alto part, my older sister the soprano, and we were so excited! We made harmony! My dad went to the music teacher at the high school and asked for a good price on three students at one time for lessons. We learned to sing trios and were known as the Stegner Sisters. We even sang on Clellan Card's WCCO State Fair 4-H radio show!

SotN: You've mentioned your time at St. Olaf. How did you end up there?

GE: I was attracted to St. Olaf because my mother's relative, Ethel Swan, was a piano major there. Ethel invited me to visit St. Olaf when I was a junior in high school. I HEARD THE ST. OLAF CHOIR SING! As a result I didn't have eyes or ears for any other school!

SotN: What are your memories from those years?

GE: The first year at St. Olaf I sang in Mr. Overby's women's chorus. One thing I remember Mr. Overby telling us was something I shared with my choirs many times over the years. He would say, "You are never so close to heaven as when you are a part of a chord in tune!" Mr.

Overby was a wonderful director for the ladies of the freshman class. I also sang in the St. Olaf choir under Olaf Christiansen starting the next year. I was the soprano section leader for two of the next three years. This was a wonderful experience because it gave me confidence. I loved the opportunity to direct music...to be a catalyst in the creation of beauty.

SotN: What did you do after graduating from St. Olaf?

GE: Right out of the chute I was working for the radio station. I didn't think I wanted to teach. Being a professional singer eventually was probably a career that I dreamed of. But my dad decided I should be a teacher... he didn't think 50 cents an hour at WCAL was much of a salary. I had not taken one of the required education courses in order to be certified for employment, but dad suggested that there was still time to take that course by correspondence before Labor Day. He had heard of an opening in Fergus Falls, and urged me to call Superintendent Leo Dominick to request an interview.

Never stop learning. Curiosity fuels your creativity. Don't be afraid to talk to directors you respect. Be brave, go to every conference you can go to. There's a whole world out there.

SotN: Did you get an interview?

GE: I did. I took the bus from Northfield to Fergus Falls, stayed overnight in the Kaddatz Hotel, and walked to the Senior High School to see Mr. Dominick the next morning. It was a rather brief interview. He said to me, "How much do you think you are worth?" Well! The most I had heard any of my friends getting was \$2300 as they headed out to teach. I told him I thought I was worth \$2700...\$300 per month and nothing over the summer. He agreed.

SotN: What do you think the superintendent was getting at when he asked you that question? Was he testing your mettle?

GE: Oh, I have no idea! [Laughs] But one of the school board members told me years later that they had given me the largest salary they had ever granted a starting teacher.

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SotN: What did that first job look like?

GE: It was a big job for a beginning teacher. As elementary music supervisor, I created lessons plans for the teachers in six grade schools, visiting thirty-six rooms each week. In the junior high, I taught ten seventh and eighth grade general music classes weekly, each with thirty students. All of this plus a class in music fundamentals for students training to be country school teachers on Tuesdays at 4 pm. My general music classes for seventh and eighth graders evolved into training groups for Seventh and Eight Grade Choruses. Fifth and sixth graders were invited to join an Elementary School Choir. After four years of K-8 teaching, I was married and began a ten-year break from the classroom to become a full-time mom. During that time I served as a Music Consultant to the Claire Ann Shover Nursery School and taught a few piano and voice lessons in my home. I also continued to direct several different church choirs.

Someone asked, “Do you think we could raise \$100,000?” I said, “Let’s think bigger. How about \$500,000?” They looked at me like I was crazy.

SotN: How did you get back into teaching in the school setting?

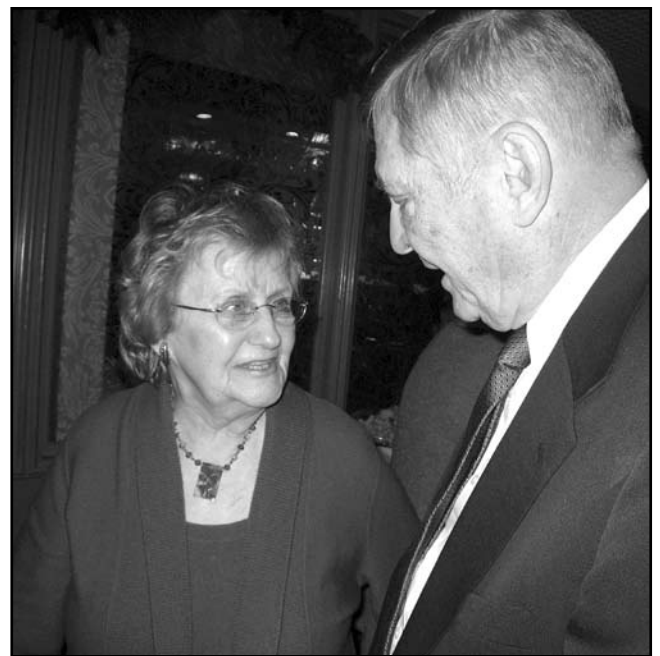
GE: I went back to school at age 40 and got my Masters degree in vocal performance at Moorhead State. Then I began to teach at the newly formed Community College in Fergus Falls.

SotN: Tell us about that position.

GE: My part-time job was teaching voice lessons in my home, since the CC was using a wing of the junior high school that did not include a music room. The same was true of the next move to the high school and the state hospital. Finally the campus on the west edge of Fergus Falls was built. I taught in the student center in a sound module. Students would be eating their lunches, watching me through the module windows giving voice lessons. It caused quite a bit of interest in the program! Finally FFCC hired me full-time as Director of Choral Activities and Voice Instructor. Over the years I taught many different music courses – music history, fundamentals of music, class piano, voice class, etc. I was also the Music Director of forty music theater productions, produced in cooperation with the FFCC Drama Department, or (for eighteen years) by The Fergus Falls Summer Community Theater, a public service project sponsored by the college.

SotN: How did your experiences with choirs in Fergus Falls evolve?

GE: The first year that I served in the K-8 position, the high school choral director asked me if I would like to form some small ensembles from interested singers in his choir. So, I organized a girl’s triple trio, a ten-voice madrigal group, and a men’s quartet all while fulfilling the duties I described before. Noon hours, before school, after school – we found time to sing! I remembered the success of those small groups when I was finally hired by FFCC full-time. Once the FFCC Choir was established, I started a madrigal group of wonderful young adults who could sing just about any score I put in front of them. Provost Wesley Waage challenged me to make FFCC “the Musical Hub of West Central Minnesota.” This got me thinking. I had been noticing community choirs performing at ACDA conventions. So, I investigated the possibility of establishing an adult group in the area. People were interested, so we formed the choir and agreed to temporarily call ourselves the “Geneva Eschweiler Singers.” Never intending to keep that name (it stuck!), the group actively rehearsed and performed until my retirement in 1993. Every spring quarter for 25 years, I would invite other singers from the area to join with the FFCC Choir and The Eschweiler Singers to form The Fergus Falls Area Chorale. This group joined instrumentalists from the Fargo-Moorhead Symphony and Fergus Falls area to perform major works. During the last three years of my tenure I added a 65-voice children’s choir to our roster of singers so that we could tackle *Carmina Burana*. During the spring of 1990, we even took 74 singers to sing in Carnegie Hall, joining six other Community College



Geneva and Carl Lipke engaged in conversation during November’s Collegiate Choral Festival Banquet.

choral groups from across the nation singing works by Menotti and Verdi. It was a busy life. I was directing five choirs when I retired in 1993!

SotN: One of the buzzwords in this issue is “Innovation.” What do you think were some of your most innovative ideas as a choral conductor?

GE: *Creative Choral Programming* – that’s the title of a book I’ll write when I’m really old...like Grandma Moses. Television was new and I felt that we were competing for audiences with their home TV sets. So, with the cooperation of John D. Donahue, Lee Krogh, and Jim McDonald (English teachers who shared the direction of plays at FFCC) we presented scripted programs with themes. Often, these were performed on existing theatrical sets to create interesting stage pictures, sometimes incorporating the use of projections behind the singers. Before the Fine Arts Building was constructed in 1972, we presented our choral concerts in the science hall, the library, the student center, and the gym. My daughter Sarah created several scripts in iambic pentameter for a series of spring madrigal dinners at the local Holiday Inn. Our annual Holiday WASSAIL FEST was often sold out. I have been told that our audiences looked forward to our concerts.

SotN: Describe your first experiences with ACDA.

GE: I’m not exactly sure what year this was, but ACDA-MN had just recently been formed. We had performed at a festival in Hibbing and someone developing our state organization was there and heard us sing. The FFCC was invited to sing at one of the very first statewide conventions at Normandale Community College. It was very exciting! This led to an invitation from Curt Hanson to sing at the Schmitt Music Summer Reading Session at the Radisson Hotel in Minneapolis in 1975.

SotN: What are some of the other ways in which you have served ACDA-MN?

GE: I have served as the North Central Division Two-Year College Repertoire and Standards Chair, as Northwest District Representative, as a member of the FMC Endowment Committee, and I spent eight years as the ACDA-MN Executive Secretary. I’ve also lead several conference sessions on teaching young singers. The FFCC choirs performed at conferences and clinics in Iowa and North Dakota in addition to several held here in Minnesota.

SotN: Why have you stayed involved with ACDA?

GE: Well, the national conventions and the chance to work with or listen to people like Robert Shaw, Alice Parker, Dale Warland, and Paul Salamunovich was incredible! I think I went to all of the state and national convention while I was at FFCC. My curiosity was insa-

table. ACDA is a community of colleagues that has opened the door to so much learning.

SotN: Can you tell us about the beginnings of the FMC Endowment? You were a central figure in its creation, correct?

GE: Well, five of us were having lunch together at that last convention before I retired. And I don’t remember who said it, but we talked about how we could help ACDA in this next phase of life. I said that I thought it was important to encourage talented young people to pursue this profession. It came down to figuring out what we could do to raise enough money to have the interest off the funds provide scholarships for young teachers to attend Dialogue and conventions and such. Someone asked, “Do you think we could raise \$100,000?” I said, “Let’s think bigger. How about \$500,000?” They looked at me like I was crazy. We worked hard to produce that first concert [FMC 125th Birthday Celebration in 1996]. Well, it seems to have worked so far. We’ve reached that \$500,000 goal!

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WHY ACDA-MN ONLINE?

The importance of our organization’s online component continues to grow with each passing year. As an ACDA-MN member, you have access to a special Members-Only section of www.acda-mn.org. You can access this section immediately, as you have already been issued a LOGIN! Your LOGIN is your primary email address (used when you registered your membership) and the last four digits of your ACDA member number. The link for the LOGIN for the Members-Only section is on the home page of the website – at the top of the left sidebar (www.acda-mn.org).

In the Members-Only section, members are able to:

- View membership information...
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- Access MN Choral Connect, a service that allows members to email all other members...
- Download minutes from ACDA-MN Board meetings and FMC Endowment Committee meetings...
- View and/or download past issues of *Star of the North*...
- Vote for statewide and district elections...

Plan to visit the Members-Only section of the ACDA of MN website today! IF you have any questions about accessing or using the pages, please contact Tom Hale, ACDA-MN Webmaster, at web@acda-mn.org.