



A Monday night rehearsal of the Sing Along Chorus at Bridge School in Lexington.



2003, Marilyn Abel (holding plaque left) and Judith Goldner (holding plaque right), with Jay Kaufman and other public officials and several of their students, receive the Distinguished Citizen award from ARC of Massachusetts.

By Laurie Atwater

Slowly members of the Sing Along Chorus take their seats in the lunchroom at Bridge School where they rehearse each Monday nights.

Some members choose a seat quietly, others call out a greeting and chat. Some exchange hugs, high fives or thumbs-up. They seem happy to be there and

delighted to see one another. There are a couple of jokesters in the group; some are shy and some chatty. It could be a group of boisterous teenagers, but the Sing Along Chorus is actually a choral group for individuals with disabilities.

"It's hard to believe that we've been doing this for over twenty years," Lexington resident and co-founder Marilyn Abel says energetically. Marilyn and her friend and co-founder Judy Goldner, also from Lexington,

are celebrating twenty-five years of SNAP (Special Needs Arts Programs), the organization that they founded in Lexington in 1981.

The celebration will be held at The Heritage Museum on May 5th at 7:00 PM and will feature acclaimed jazz singer Carol Sloane accompanied by Boston Pops' pianist, Brad Hatfield.

Sloane will be performing the Duke Ellington Songbook. Lexington State Representative Jay Kaufman will be the Master of Ceremonies for this event that will also feature a Silent Auction.

The Special Connection

"Music is the special connection," Marilyn says acknowledging the role of music and choral singing as the vehicle for the greater goal—to offer people with disabilities an opportunity to participate and contribute in a way that fosters learning, socialization and camaraderie.

The music combined with the

understanding, discipline and extraordinary caring of Abel and Goldner have created a magical environment in which individuals, some with profound disabilities, can come together to share songs, create friendships, gain self-confidence and really blossom over time.

Sing, Socialize and Share

On this Monday night I watch as Judy signals the start of rehearsal with a few chords on the piano.

Marilyn announces that it's "time for music and time for fun." In the next hour they sing *Leavin' On A Jet Plane, Let me*

Entertain You, Somewhere Over the Rainbow and more. Marilyn reviews the words and Judy patiently revisits the melodies again and again. Some sing out with complete abandon while others struggle with intense concentration to master the lyrics.

This is important

SNAP

SPECIAL NEEDS ARTS PROGRAMS

celebrates 25

YEARS IN LEXINGTON





The very first performance of the Sing Along Chorus



Left to right: Courtney Wissenbach with her mom, Sheila and daughter and Georgeann DeAngelo with daughter Nadine after Monday night rehearsal.

business. The chorus will be performing at their twenty-fifth anniversary celebration and they need to be ready.

On its face, SNAP is just two choral groups: the Sing Along Chorus, a choral group for teens to young adults and the Sing Along Singers, a choral group for adults. Judy plays the piano and Marilyn leads the singing. The Sing Along Chorus rehearses on Mondays and the older group on Wednesday. Most of the members of the younger group still live with their families. The older singers reside in assisted living facilities although one gentleman lives on his own.

The younger group has grown up in the years since Congress enacted the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (now known as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)). These individuals have benefited from more exposure to mainstream classrooms, more intervention and more education. The older group is noticeably more subdued and less verbal.

The commitment and strength of these families is extraordinary. Many members come from miles away to participate in the chorus. The range of disabilities runs the gamut in each of the groups, but when these members come to chorus each week, they come to sing and everything else is secondary.

After the hour-long rehearsal, members share snacks, news, stories and friendship. "This time for socializing is almost more important than the singing," Abel says. The chance to interact with peers, to belong and to contribute is the essence of what it is to be part of a community and the members find friendship and support in this very special group.



Friendship and Purpose

Judy and Marilyn met in Lexington in the 60s. They met at an audition for the Lexington Choral Society (which was directed by future Masterworks director, Alan Lannan who recently passed away).

Judy, an accomplished pianist, was teaching at a preschool, performing sporadically, working toward a Masters Degree in Child Study and teaching piano. Abel was teaching piano also. They both continue to teach piano to this day! Abel also teaches music classes at the Munroe Center for the Arts and Goldner performs with a Chamber Music group.

They were both young mothers with backgrounds in music, a love of performing and a desire to work with children. Marilyn was looking for a way to combine her love of music and her interest in the special needs population in a way that would make a real contribution to the community. She was working part-time at Lexington High School as a Special Education Teacher and observed that many of her students mainstreamed beautifully into art classes and the chorus, but they often had little social life outside of school.

Both women believed that the arts could provide a means for integrating people with disabilities into the community and they liked the concept of a chorus that would meet weekly outside of school.

"We did our research," Goldner says. They spoke to the parents of Marilyn's high school students and went to many of the parents of students enrolled in the LABBB program. They also visited the Fernald School to observe similar activities there.

The response from the parents was extremely enthusiastic. Marilyn and Judy approached Karen Simmons of the Lexington Recreation Department to see if they would be interested in sponsoring the project. Simmons agreed and the Sing Along Chorus, for teenagers, was born. In the spring of 1984, an adult chorus, Sing Along Singers, was formed and in 1985, a children's group, Musical Experiences, followed.

"Part of the concept behind the idea," says Judy Goldner, "is to give the chorus members a way to perform community service for others." Most members have been on the receiving end of the

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May 5, 2006

7:00 PM

The Heritage Museum
Lexington, Massachusetts

With all the talk today about new jazz singers, none comes even close to Carol Sloane. This is what jazz is all about."

Nat Hentoff, Boston, May 2004

Carol Sloan is one of the best jazz vocalists...with sterling technique, vocal warmth and dancing rhythms."

The Boston Phoenix

"When Carol Sloane sings at the Village Vanguard, as she did last month, it's like hearing the concentrated essence of a half-century's worth of jazz in one night."

Louise Kennedy, Boston Globe,
February 13, 2004

Winner, 2006 Backstage Magazine
Bistro Award

for outstanding Jazz Performance

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community service continuum, Abel points out. "It's nice for them to feel that sense of giving to others."

High School Volunteers

The program also offers high school students a great opportunity to earn community service hours. "Our students are really great," says Abel. "They are very sensitive and caring and can help us a lot."

Naomi Logan is a volunteer with the Sing Along Chorus. "I've really gotten a lot out of it," she says. "It's amazing to see the progress that people have made, just in the 2 years I've been doing it. I've watched people go from barely ever singing, to singing along to every song."

Volunteers usually work with individuals to help them to focus during rehearsals. It can require lots of patience. "It's a gradual process, and coaxing people to pay attention and sing can be difficult," Logan says. "In the chorus, whoever I'm working with at a rehearsal is largely my responsibility for that period of time. Sing Along has pushed me to take that responsibility, and I've developed a lot from that."

Naomi who is involved in Policy Debate at Lexington High School and the Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) has developed affection and empathy for the chorus members she has come to know. "I also see a lot of discrimination towards people that have mental disabilities. I think it's important to have firsthand experience with this population so I can help combat that discrimination. Volunteering with Sing Along has definitely made me more aware of the difficulties these people face, and I'm glad for that."

Challenges and Rewards

It's not easy bringing this diverse group together to sing in unison. Some members are isolated, some are developmentally disabled, lack language skills, have physical handicaps and do not always stay on task. But over time, with patience and

skillful guidance, Judy and Marilyn help each member to find their unique voice and become part of the group.

Abel and Goldner take their choruses to hospitals and nursing homes where they conduct sing-alongs with patients and residents. "They really feel like they are

I was looking for a different type of an activity for Lynne," she says.

"What's really magical about it," she says, "is the way that Marilyn and Judy make the members feel really important. They have a way of really pulling them in."

Over the years Lois has seen many



Chorus members

contributing something special to others," says Abel. This has been one of the powerful factors in building the overall self-esteem of chorus members and helping them to learn to integrate into a group and socialize appropriately. "I think that's one of the things that comes through—the joy of participation. Even if they can't carry a tune, they sing with great verve and enjoyment," Marilyn says affectionately.

"Music is a medium that one can participate in on almost any level and have it be accepted," Goldner says. "That's why it has been so effective for us."

A Meaningful Experience

Lynne Bellini has been with the group for ten years. Her mom Lois is now on the Board of Directors for SNAP and has been an active supporter since Lynne joined the chorus.

"She wouldn't miss it," she says. Lynne who is now forty-five was born with Down syndrome. "We joined the group because

changes in the members. "It's a very slow-moving, quiet thing that happens to them and it's very meaningful to them," she says. "I've seen over time the growth and development in these kids," she adds. "And they love to perform!"

In fact, the annual talent show can often be quite a revelation. Lois tells a story about one young man who loved to sing *Sunrise, Sunset*. "When he first came to chorus, he was withdrawn and seemed a little down," she explains. "Little by little he came out of his shell." When it came time for the talent show no one was surprised when he chose to sing *Sunrise, Sunset*, but everyone was stunned when he sat down at the piano and accompanied himself! He had taught himself to play the song on the piano at his sister's house.

Bellini is excited to be a part of the SNAP Board now that they are attempting to raise money to support the future of the choruses. "It's going to be a big transition," she says of the work ahead, but she is excited to be

part of the growth of an organization that has been so important to her family.

Other parents are equally enthusiastic. At the Monday night chorus rehearsal, moms gathered in an adjoining room with the piano and voices rising and falling in the background.

Georgeann DeAngelo's daughter Nadine has been a member for over 10 years. "My daughter loves singing," she says. "She loves coming to chorus." The families have become friends outside the group and they have provided support for each other. "There is great unity here," she says of the group gathered at Bridge. "This is our venting time when the kids are rehearsing."

Sheila Wissenbach's daughter Courtney counts the group as a big part of her social life. "Marilyn and Judy are phenomenal, special people," she says.

The parents credit the group for providing a great experience, beautiful friendships and a strong support system for their children.

In 2003, Judy and Marilyn and The Special Needs Arts Program were recognized by ARC of Massachusetts (an advocacy group for individuals with disabilities) their *Distinguished Citizen Award*.

Marilyn Abel and Judith Goldner have nurtured this very special organization with patience from and it is their sincere hope that SNAP will continue to grow in the years to come.

"We look at our members and we see not only what they can do, but what they will hopefully be Abel to do in the future," Abel says. "That's a very rewarding part of this work for Judy and me—seeing those changes over the years."

To learn more about SNAP, visit their website at www.snapsing.org. To purchase tickets to the Carol Sloane concert or to make a donation, call 781-862-7179.



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