A Path Well-Chosen

By Gordon Eriksen

Some people seem to be born knowing what their careers will be, and how to go about achieving lifelong success. Joyce Zastrow is such a one.

Joyce, who was born in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, knew from a very young age that she must have a career in music and teaching. Blessed with an exceptional voice, she steadily followed a path from elementary and secondary school through college that would assure a musical future. After earning a Bachelor of Arts degree at Valparaiso University in Indiana, and a Master of Music at Indiana University, she held three teaching positions that helped to shape, further, her goals. The first was for three years at Luther College, Decorah, Iowa, where she encountered and embraced an enthusiasm for Lutheran choral singing. The second, for another three years, was at the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities Campus, where, in a major department of music in a major state university, she was exposed to a breadth and depth of music beyond any previous experience. Finally, she had three years at Oberlin Conservatory, Ohio, where she was able to focus and hone her teaching skills in an intensely dedicated environment.

With such a strong background, Ms. Zastrow was ready for a position that would offer a broad range of opportunities in which to use her talents. She chose Western Michigan University, arriving in 1962, and immediately became immersed in teaching voice classes and applied voice. She also had the responsibility of directing the Women’s Glee Club, and quickly became an active member in the community of some 14,000 students and staff members located on the west side of Kalamazoo. After a number of years as a choral director, she turned completely to her main interest: teaching studio voice and other courses important to a successful singing career. Among them were vocal pedagogy, song literature, and the all-important English, French, German, and Italian diction for singers. When Dr. Joyce Zastrow retired, in 1990, literally hundreds of students would attest to the fact that because they completed her courses, they were far better “singers” and professional performers. Moreover, from her classes came numerous students who are teaching the next generation of young performers at the public school and college/university level, as well as many who sing in opera and other professional settings in the United States and Europe.

Professor Zastrow’s interest in seeking to be proficient in the various foreign languages required of a singer added some wonderful musical codicils to her career. Among them was a summer at the American Conservatory, in Fontainebleau, France, where she studied under the renowned Nadia Boulanger. She also spent a summer at the Mozarteanum in Salzburg, Austria, working with renowned German artists including Coach Erik Werba. Still another great opportunity came in a summer at the Aspen Music Festival when she could learn from Jennie Tourel. Along the noted path that she traveled, she also took the time to work on a Doctor of Musical Arts degree at the University of Illinois, Urbana/Champaign. In order to complete the degree, she took a year’s leave of absence from WMU, and served as a teaching assistant in Illinois’ fine graduate program. (Librarians, please take note: Joyce and I, both Illinois alums, remarked about the size and quality of the music libraries at Indiana, where she earned her first graduate degree, and at Illinois, where her D.M.A. came into being. We were agreed that if one could not find what was needed in these two fine collections, the next library of choice had to be the Library of Congress.)

If anyone reading this thinks that Professor Zastrow epitomizes the concept of “all work and no play ... make for a dull life,” it simply isn’t true. She definitely pursued a career with diligence and success, but, at the same time, pursued with equal determination a wide range of interests. She loves to garden, and has a yard with an unhindered view across both her flowery handiwork and into open fields. She enjoys cross-country skiing when the snow pack and weather permits, and is an avid golfer. The latter enthusiasm has taken her, since retirement, to several Elderhostels that focus on golf. Traveling, needless to say, is still another avocation. Recent trips have included Italy, Turkey, and Israel. As she observed, “I’ll be among the hoards in Oberammergau in 2000 seeing the Passion Play.”

Joyce’s civic commitments have continued to be impressive. She is a member of the Outreach Board of Opera Grand Rapids, and still is an active part of the Thursday Morning Musicale organization of Kalamazoo. She has served on the Ethics Committee of the National Association of Teachers of Singing. Her work with the Kalamazoo Association of Retired School Personnel (KARSP) has been a challenging and time-consuming project. She was on the program committee for several years before entering the administrative cycle. She then served terms as President Elect, President, and Past President—a commitment of which she is justly proud. And, of course, she has continued to “do things” with the University to which she dedicated some twenty-eight years. One of them has been her growing interest in and service to the Friends of the University Libraries.

And such is the story of one who has chosen well her path through life. Joyce Zastrow has chosen and lives a life of music, a music and a life not unlike the music noted in Emerson’s ode to Music:

Let me go where er I will
I hear a sky-born music still: ...
There, always, always something sings.