
PRESIDENT'S PAGE

Kathy Perconti – NYSSMA® President



MUSIC FOR LIFE: MY MOTHER'S STORY



RoseMarie Tremblay, age 18



RoseMarie Heenan, age 84

I am writing this article while visiting my mom, who is 84 years old and living in Florida. This is her story — her “Music for Life.”

My mother attended Royalton-Hartland High School in Gasport, NY, where she graduated eighth in her class. She played piano, sang in choir, participated in NYSSMA® festivals, and was selected as a singer in the all-county chorus (she still has the pin on a charm bracelet). She says she also participated in all-state chorus.

Her high school music teacher believed she had the ability to become a music educator, but in those days women were expected to marry and raise families. This encouragement from her music teacher was never spoken aloud until later in her life.

Although she never pursued music education as a profession, music was always in Mom's blood. Perhaps that spark was inspired by her paternal aunt, Bernadette Tremblay Laffey, an accomplished concert pianist. Family stories say she performed at Carnegie Hall, though we cannot confirm that today.

Her grandmother, Helene Savard Tremblay, was a singer, and we still treasure a glass-plate portrait of her, posed mid-song — a stunning reminder that music has lived in our

family for generations. When I sang a solo in my sixth-grade talent show, wearing an ivory lace gown, Mom told me I reminded her of her grandmother in that photograph. In that moment, it felt as though the music — and the women who performed it — had come full circle.

My earliest memory of Mom and music came when we moved to Vestal, NY, when I was seven years old. She had just had her fourth child, my sister Tricia, the year before. The move from Lockport to the Binghamton area was difficult. Our extended family remained in Lockport, and my father had accepted a promotion with NYSEG that required relocation. It was a major life transition for all of us, and I believe music helped carry her (and me) through it.

Though finances were tight, my parents purchased a used upright Everett piano — the same piano I still own today. At night, after putting us to bed, Mom would sit at that piano and play. I remember hearing *Rustic Dance* by C.R. Howell and a transcription of Liszt's *Hungarian Rhapsody No. 2* drifting to my bedroom. She would also play and sing *My Wild Irish Rose* and *When Irish Eyes Are Smiling*, a nod to my father's Irish heritage. Music filled our home.

She found my first piano teacher, who came to our house weekly, though that arrangement didn't last long. Eventually

she connected me with Lillian Oliver, who taught me until I left for college. Because of finances, I initially took lessons only once a month. Over time, those lessons became weekly: every Saturday at 8:30 a.m. That consistency shaped my life.

Church music was also central to our family. At Our Lady of Sorrows in Vestal, the pastor noticed my mom singing boldly from the front of the congregation and asked her to start a folk group. It was the 1970s, after all. Folk groups were flourishing in Catholic churches everywhere. She gathered teenage guitarists, invited singers — including me — and rehearsed weekly in our home. She selected the music for Mass and eventually learned to play the guitar. In time, the folk Mass moved from the gym into the main church. She led that ministry for 13 years before my parents moved back to Lockport while I was in college.

Back in Lockport, she continued coordinating music ministry at St. John's as well as St. Mary's in Gasport — entirely as a volunteer — until my parents relocated to Florida in 2004. While at St. Mary's, Mom and Dad sang at my wedding, a memory I treasure deeply. When they moved south, her active music-making paused but didn't end. That is the beauty of music; it waits for you. Music truly is for life, and it can re-enter your story at any moment.

After my father passed away in 2018, my mom faced a new chapter. She had lived in Davenport for years but never felt fully connected. Before my father's illness, they had considered moving to The Villages, but circumstances kept them in place. A year after his passing, she decided to try again. She rented in The Villages and eventually purchased a home there.

The Villages offers countless activities, including many musical ensembles. My mom decided to audition for The Village Voices, a respected choral ensemble that performs traditional repertoire twice a year with a professional con-

ductor. She had never auditioned for a choir before, nor sung in a traditional ensemble since high school. She called me for help preparing. When she was accepted as an Alto 2, the questions began: "He keeps saying 'lift.' What does that mean?" We FaceTime'd so I could see her score and explain terminology. Watching her step back into formal choral singing at age 79 was nothing short of inspiring.

She later joined The Village Pops, a more relaxed ensemble that performs lighter repertoire. She loved both groups and especially enjoyed the community and joy of singing.

For a time, she also returned to church music ministry, but three ensembles proved to be a bit much!

During the pandemic, Mom found yet another way to keep music alive. Each day, she recorded herself playing her keyboard and singing,

then shared the song on social media, offering comfort, connection and a bit of joy during an uncertain time.

Today, my mom is recovering from open-heart surgery, and she has not been able to sing this year. Her first question after surgery was, "When do you think I can get back to choir?" Music gives her friends. It gives her structure. It gives her purpose. It gives her something to prepare for and something to look forward to.

"Music for Life" is not just a presidential theme. It is not a slogan. It is the lived experience of an 84-year-old woman who sang in high school, raised four children, led volunteer ministries, paused when life required it, and courageously auditioned for a choral ensemble eight decades into her journey. Music does not belong to a season of life. It belongs to *all* of life. And for that, I am grateful — as a daughter, as an educator, and as President of NYSSMA®. ||

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