

Written by By TERRY MATHEWS, News-Telegram Arts Editor
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When talking about the things she loves, Carol Allen sometimes leaves this world. If you pay close attention, you'll realize the moment she goes to a place in her head where she's planning the next play date with her grandchildren, realizing her dream of a fine arts series or finding out that both performances of the North East Texas Choral Society's Christmas concert are SRO.

"I am obsessed with the idea of selling out the auditorium," she confessed during a recent interview. "We're going to work really hard this year. The great minds on the board are thinking. They know I'll have some kind of mental breakdown if we don't sell out."

Like Tom Landry before Jerry Jones, Allen has been the only "coach" NETCS has needed for the past 16 seasons.

"I was at a [Sulphur Springs] symphony league meeting all those years ago," she explained. "The conductor said he needed a chorus."

Lee Heisey looked down the table at me and said, "Carol, he needs a chorus."

According to Allen, the league had been talking about a chorus for several years, but she never expected to be tapped for the job.

"I promise you," she said. "Lee might as well have been speaking Sanskrit."

As she wondered who would be up for the job, she told the board she would look into it.

She decided to put a "little ad" in the newspaper announcing auditions.

"I think it said something like, 'Do you love to sing? Don't be afraid. Come audition,'" she remembered. "I assumed no one would come. Nobody knew who I was. Not one person."



She auditioned 117 people and accepted 98 of them, essentially singing with 100 voices from the get go. Of the original 98, 35 are still singing, a retention percentage that speaks volumes.

"When I realized this was going to happen, I knew we needed two things: a place to meet and a board of directors," she noted. "I made one phone call to First Methodist and they agreed to let us meet there."

Then, Allen called her friend Barbara McKenzie.

"Barbara, if we're going to do this, we will need a board of directors," Allen said. "Do you think this chorus is a good idea?"

McKenzie was immediately on board, telling Allen, "I'll do anything you need me to do."

After 16 successful seasons, Allen has learned that educating her singers is crucial.

"As a rookie, Carol told me to sit near my section leader and listen to the voices around me and, of course, to watch her," said veteran singer Linda Mabe. "Carol's excellence as a director comes from a place beyond her musical expertise. I believe she 'reads' our understanding – or lack of – on some pieces and paints images in our minds to achieve the sound she wants."

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Allen also wants to share her knowledge with the audience.

“You’d better hope that you raise every concert to the next level and it ought to be part of your goals to bring your audience along,” she expressed. “Or, they won’t come back.”

She loves it when people tell her, “I didn’t used to like that kind of music, but now I never miss a concert.”

Allen also knows NETCS has beaten the odds.

“There are so many things about choral society that should not be the way they are,” she explained. “Our population base does not support a choral society of our size, ever, let alone for 17 years.”

She has also learned to lean on her group for support.

“Marilyn Powers came alongside [to help] when Mother became so ill,” she remembered. Allen’s mother died in 2011.

Mabe says Allen “would be the first to give credit to all who help her. She relies on our board, section leaders and general membership to make difficult decisions.”

Auditions for the upcoming season will be held Saturday, Aug. 9, with rehearsals beginning Monday, Aug. 11 and continuing until the first weekend in December, when the group debuts “Once Upon a Christmas.”

Just thinking about the show makes Allen go all dreamy again.

“If we can sell out the two shows, it will be magic,” she promised. “When you get that many listeners and that many energized singers and musicians and a director who has gone totally off her rocker, the energy is far reaching and unforgettable.”

NETCS singers have also shared unforgettable moments with Allen.

“Sometimes, things happen that only our choral family can see,” Mabe explained.

Some are funny, like a lost baton or a momentary lapse of memory.

Sharon Feldt, who has been with the chorus for several seasons said, “Carol goes into ‘treble clef’ about once a week and you can tell she’s got some amazing idea brewing!”

Other moments are more sober.

“Then, there are times that tears stream down her face as we sing and she just becomes lost in the music itself,” Mabe recalled.

Carol doesn’t remember life without music or books.



Her parents were Bonnie Ruth and Calvin Chapman Owens. Her father was a lieutenant colonel in the Air Force. Her mother was the “perfect” officer’s wife and played a mean game of golf.

Allen was born in Wichita Falls, at the old Bethania Catholic Hospital, “not that I’m old,” she quipped.

“We listened to music and we read,” she stated. “It’s what we did.”

The family moved from Wichita Falls to Arizona to McAllen and then to Medford Lakes, N.J. While in high school, Allen’s best friend volunteered her for choir.

“He told our director, Mr. Copeland, that I could sing,” Allen said. “That audition changed my life. Mr. Copeland was an amazing influence on my life.”

Allen’s world opened up in other ways during the time she lived in New Jersey.

“There was every kind of religious background, every kind of culture and every sort of language,” she said. “It was truly a melting pot.”

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As a result of her exposure to such diversity, Allen says, “I don’t see color. I don’t see lifestyle. If you’re happy, I’m glad. It’s all about acceptance.”

Allen and her husband, equine veterinarian John, raised their children – Jordan, 41, a computer architect for United Airlines based in Chicago; Rachel Vendsel, 36, a counselor in Dallas; and Victor, 34, an actor who lives in Chicago – with that same acceptance.

“We taught them that each person is valuable for whoever they are and for whatever gifts they bring,” she stated.



The Allens have three grandchildren, Maryjayne Keeley Allen, 11, Connor, 4, and Natalie Grace, 2.

Before becoming worship arts director at First United Methodist Church 12 years ago, Allen was “first and foremost a wife and mother.” She also taught private voice lessons and was the choir director at the high school for two years.

In addition to selling out the NETCS Christmas shows, Allen has imagined live performances at FUMC.

That dream is about to come true.

“On Sunday, Oct. 26, we will debut the Fine Arts Series at First United Methodist Church,” she said. “Bass singer Jared Schwartz and his accompanist extraordinaire Mary Dibbern will be in performance.”

Allen and FUMC member John Prickette have had their heads together “forever” about a fine arts series.

Dibbern has been to Sulphur Springs twice in her role as music director for education and family programs for The Dallas Opera.

Schwartz has performed at FUMC in the past at the funeral and subsequent memorial service for Mrs. June Marie West Brim.



“Jared is the rarest of performers,” Allen expounded. “He is down-to-earth with the intellectual ability to take you above the clouds and beyond. And Mary? No one will believe how wonderful she is.”

This booking gelled after Allen saw Schwartz and Dibbern perform June 1 at St. Matthew’s Cathedral in Dallas. She believes divine providence had something to do with getting the duo to Sulphur Springs.

“This just fell into place,” Allen remarked. “When something is sparking in the God realm, it only takes about 14 seconds for the whole thing to come together.”

Now, if the Christmas shows will just sell out, Carol Allen can go back to day-dreaming and living her motto: “The best is yet to come.”