

Morison believes music can change lives

Jane DeLoach Morison grew up in a small farming community near Jonesborough, Tennessee.

"In our church there was an older gentleman who had an amazing bass voice. Every time I heard him sing his part in the hymns, I was enthralled. I remember coming home and telling my parents how much I loved his voice. They were not musicians and were really intrigued by this. We did not have a piano in our home, but I learned to play by ear when visiting my cousin, and in the school cafeteria. I started piano lessons just before I turned 7, because Cherry Smith, who was the music teacher at my school, heard me playing the piano and thought I should learn to read music. She called my mother, my parents found a piano, and I started lessons with her. She taught me to read music and gave me classical training, but she also encouraged me to continue playing by ear. Those were the golden days of Elton John, Carol King, Billy Joel and many others who used acoustic piano in their hits. I just loved all genres of music, so if I heard something I liked, I would learn to play it on the piano," Morison says.

She began teaching music when she was in the eighth grade. "There was a young lady in our community whose mom wanted me to teach her instead of driving her to another teacher's house," she says. She had a few students all through high school.

By this time, she knew that she wanted to be a teacher, so she went to East Tennessee State University for her Bachelor of Music Education degree where she studied piano with Donald Conflenti, voice with Robert LaPella, and choral conducting with Thomas Jenrette. In college she had a co-op teaching piano at Cates Music Center in Johnson City, Tennessee.

When she graduated from ETSU, many local school systems had cut music from their curricula, at least in the elementary and middle schools, and there were no local job openings. She decided to pursue a master's degree from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, where she studied piano with Joseph DiPiazza and sang under the batons of Richard Cox and Hillary Apfelstadt. In graduate school she had an assistantship teaching class piano and accompanying singers and instrumentalists.

After living in North Carolina, she moved to Bristol in 1996, and since then she taught private piano

in her home, general music at St. Anne Catholic School, piano at Sullins Academy and Kindermusik in various locations. In 2004, she became the accompanist for the East Tennessee Children's Choir. In 2007, she became the director of that group. She has been the artistic director of the Mountain Empire Children's Choral Academy since 2009.

In addition to her responsibilities at MECCA, she teaches piano at King University and is the interim director of choral activities at Emory & Henry College. She also works with a group of children at her church and serves on the faculties of the Virginia Suzuki Institute and the King University Choral Arts Camp.

"I am currently doing most of the musical things I want to do, although now that we no longer have children at home I feel like I would like to prepare and perform a solo piano recital again. On the non-musical side I would like to do more gardening and a lot more bicycle riding," Morison says.

"Some of my personal highlights as a performer include conducting at Carnegie Hall, at the Festival of the Aegean in Greece, at St. Patrick's Cathedral in Dublin, Ireland, and performing as a piano soloist in Switzerland. I have also enjoyed being a vocal soloist for several major choral works, and especially loved playing the Mother in 'Amahl and the Night Visitors' with my own son playing Amahl. I also enjoy singing duets with my daughter and have loved accompanying both of my children on their various instruments.

"I think my biggest highlight as a conductor was directing the Highlands Youth Ensemble in their performance for the 2016 American Choral Directors Association Southern Division Conference. We had to submit recordings from three consecutive years in order to be considered, and we were one of only 16 choirs chosen from 106 auditions. The choir worked so hard to prepare for the concert, and they were wonderful.

"My biggest challenge as a musician and music educator is knowing when to say 'no.' I have been blessed to have never been unemployed but have been over employed from time to time," Morison says.

Morison is dedicated to the benefits the arts have on children.



Jane DeLoach Morison

"Recently while I was working with the Virginia District VII Junior Treble Honor Choir, I told them a little about my background growing up on a farm at the end of the dead-end road, and how music has taken me all over the world. I realized most of the international and domestic travel I have done has been because of music.

"I have seen how involvement in music has allowed many young people to rise above, and even leave situations in their lives that were not healthy for them. One of my colleagues in the American Choral Directors Association told me last summer that music brought him out of poverty, and I have been a witness to that, and even more in some of the young people I have taught. I, of course, cannot share names or personal stories, but I believe firmly in advocating for young people because I have seen the power of the arts to change so many lives.

"I believe all young people need adults who believe in them, and who hold them to high standards. I believe that when we do not hold young people to high standards we are subliminally telling them that they are not good enough. In our choirs we find ways to give even our youngest singers leadership opportunities, and thereby teach good citizenship through music.

"I have also found that sometimes choir is the place where a child can

shine. I am not talking about as a soloist, although we give opportunities for those too. I am talking about the importance of being a member of a team whose purpose is to create something of beauty that they share with the community. There is an amazing sense of accomplishment and camaraderie when one works hard to learn something difficult, and then performs it with a symphony orchestra, or at Biltmore or any of the other places we perform.

"We also spend time learning music in different languages from other cultures, and thereby learning about those cultures too. I believe empathy is one thing that is in short supply these days, and learning about other people through their music is a good way to help kids develop that. And we build empathy with others in our own communities, and even in our own choirs because we have children from many socioeconomic groups and from many religious traditions.

"I was very humbled to be nominated for this award by so many respected colleagues. Every day I feel very responsible about doing a good job for all the young people in my charge, and I am glad there are people who believe the work we do in MECCA is important enough to be recognized," she says. *A!*