

STILLWATER

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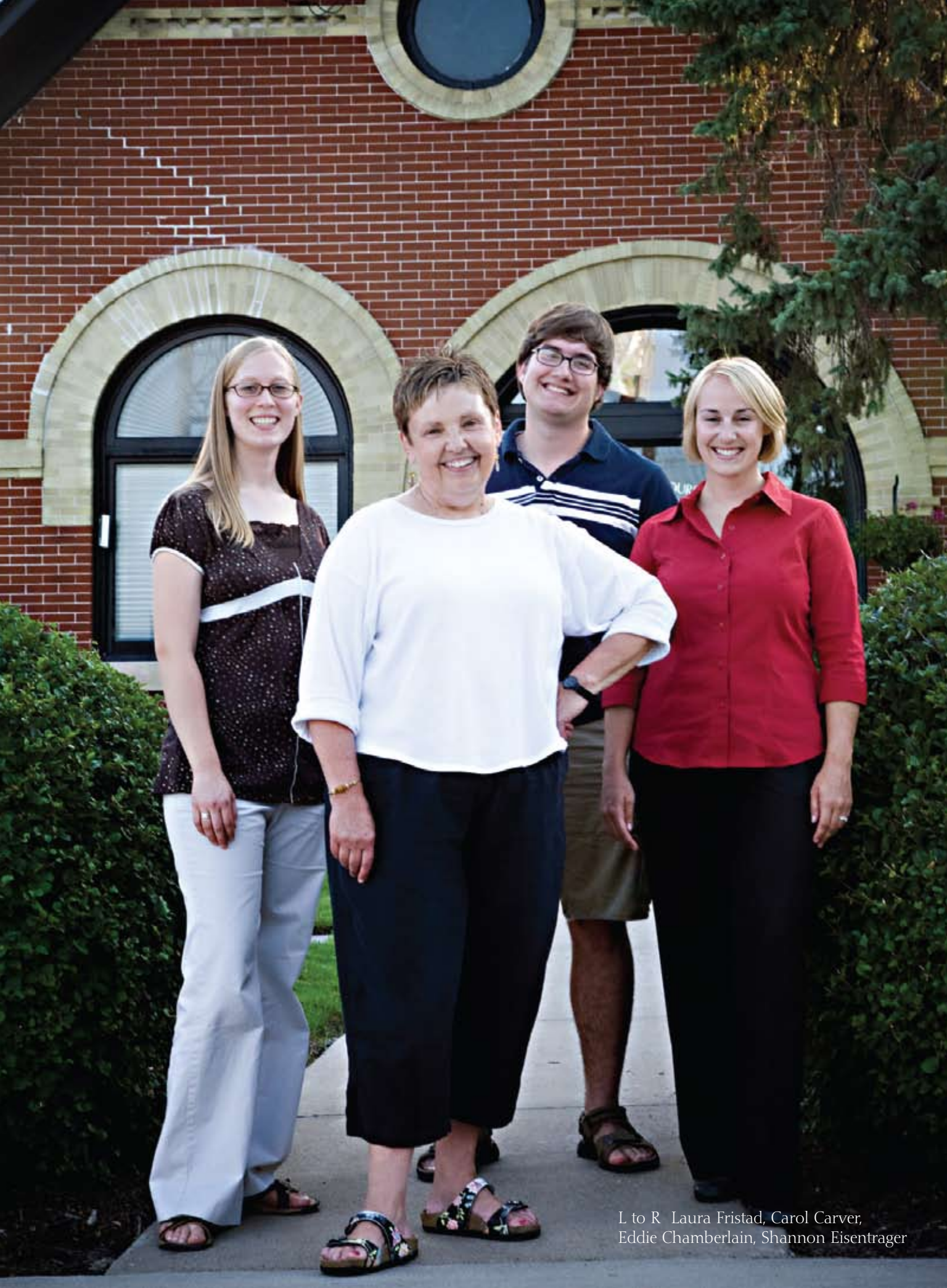
LIVING

For people who love the valley

Choral Voices

**Valley
Chamber
Chorale
Turns 35**





L to R Laura Fristad, Carol Carver,
Eddie Chamberlain, Shannon Eisentrager

35 Years of Song

BY PETER MCNIFF
PHOTOS BY AIMEE CHRISTENSEN

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For generations now we've heard of the great ideas cooked up between friends in the garage or basement that later evolve into a household name. The Valley Chamber Chorale is no different. When asked how it all started Carol Carver's face glows a bit as she smiles ear to ear and responds "it happened in a kitchen. Three of us, Jan Seim, Mina Driscoll and I were talking about our love of choral music. They were both singers and were considering joining a choir in White Bear Lake. Then I said "why couldn't we do this in Stillwater?" All of us were new to Stillwater at that time so I agreed to organize it and get it started - then after that someone else would need to run it - because I was not a choral director per se at that time."

The three friends sent a notice to the Gazette saying that they wanted to start a choir and that there would be a meeting at a home on north 4th Street. Fourteen people showed up that night, and so it began. Carol remarks "I knew from the moment they sang their first note that no one else was going to conduct the choir. We scheduled a concert in December of 1975 at the Presbyterian Church, a move that motivated us to work hard and prepare - we hired great musicians, even then, to perform with us." For three dollars area residents could witness history in the making as the Valley Chamber Chorale took flight.

Carol's compensation that first year was a small piece of pottery and for several years her gifts from the singers grew progressively larger. She tells me that "through the years we went from 14 singers to 20 singers, then to auditioned singers only, then to 24 and then to 28 and then grew by scheduling more concerts per season. A board of directors was created the second year." Now the Valley Chamber Chorale has a well-developed working board that does a great job managing the business side of the choir. Carol is free to create exceptional programs in part because she has confidence in her supporting cast.

It would seem that the audience is listening as ticket sales have been strong from the start. Carol tells of the early years when then choir sang in Marine at Christmas, presenting a wonderful, magical, dinner kind of thing that was very popular. She was almost blushing with her answer so I just had to follow up with "so you put a date

out there saying we are going to perform - and it sells out?" "Yep" she says pleasantly and matter of factly, "we sold out the first concert and have continued doing so for over 30 years."

I asked Carol how she keeps it fresh after such a long run. "Well something happens between seasons" she says "you get a few kernels of something, and an idea hits. I more or less develop ideas and then bounce them off trusted confidants and it goes from there."

I'm glad that Carol understands the community so well. She seems to understand what we want as concert goers; her standards and our interests are in harmony. "Some things are going to be the same - like the location - and some things will be different about each of our concerts" Carol says. With her words still hanging in the air Carol's eyes veered from mine and I imagined that one of those kernels might have popped into her thoughts.

These singers could easily schedule dozens more concerts per season and travel to exotic destinations to compete with similar choirs but they choose to stay in Stillwater. Carol understands that people only have so much time and her choir members enjoy giving their time to this passion. "I've always been an advocate for more of an event than a concert. We want to provide a total experience, we don't just process to the risers: start with a renaissance piece and end with a spiritual piece - that would be typical - we are - we are anything but typical. I love to create collaborations with an accordionist or a dancer, or a jazz singer or painter. This type of collaboration brings the greatest rewards for us."

Reward for them? I felt compelled to insert "I think the audiences are enjoying that same reward." "Well we hope so, that's what we're striving for." Carol responded, in the kindest way possible. "For me and many of my singers we need to keep it fresh, we can't just keep doing the same thing year after year. The nice thing for us is that we are not expected to do anything predictable. The choral repertoire isn't forced upon us for a concert. It's fine if we want to do all jazz or do all contemporary music because in the next concert we are going to be doing Poulenc or Duruflé or Bach."

Carol told me about a great concert that she attended recently. What stuck with me was the way in which she told me, it was with a spirit of real joy and honest enthusiasm - she lit up with youthful charm. Maybe that quality is one reason young people feel completely welcome in the company of more the venerable singers in Carol's choir. "Are there any significant differences between the younger and older singers?" I asked. "The challenge with the young singer ages is that they come back to Stillwater after college - their lives continue to evolve - they might have child or go off to graduate school. Their days with us may be short, but ever so sweet. You just have to enjoy them when while you have them."

I asked Carol to comment on the latest wave of younger singers in the choir. "When I think about a moment in time, Laura's arrival was sort of a turning point for us. Laura's presence helped make it possible for other young people to get involved."

I met with three of the younger members of the Valley Chamber Chorale: the afore mentioned Laura Fristad,

Eddie Chamberlain and Shannon Eisentrager. These three are proud to tell you that they were choir members during high school. And why wouldn't they be proud to share a rich history of excellence with the choir program at the high school. Stillwater Area High School's choir has been a perennial "best of the best" among high school choirs since Dennis Brown was the director decades ago.

Shannon tells me that "I just kind of got the itch to sing again so I got up the guts to try out. Everyone in the choir has been supportive even though I was a little rusty in the beginning." Shannon answered my questions with ease, the quiet calm often found in performers. "Have you found it to be much different than what you've experienced before?" I asked. "Well, I didn't know too much going in so it was all a pleasant surprise. The music is tough and I hadn't sung for a few years so I just had to work hard and catch up."

Eddie had a similar response to my questions except that he and a friend started in the choir together. "I felt taken in by the choir's family mentality, a closeness



particularly within the sections. Each section has its own distinct personality, one cracks jokes and another section says stop cracking jokes." Were there any surprises? I asked. "I didn't know how long this choir had been around, 35 years is a long time. Knowing that brought to light how big this thing was." Eddie answers.

Laura comes to the conversation from a unique perspective. Her parents have both been in the choir for years and years. She tells us "the family connections referenced in our conversation so far are my parents. I think my parents are the last of the original 14 members still performing. My first memories of the Valley Chamber Chorale are decorating the courthouse for the Christmas concert as a six or seven year old."

"So when did you join the choir?" I asked Laura. As she pushed the answer through a hearty laugh she said "I had to corner Carol and tell her that I am auditioning for her. I actually grabbed her and said 'sit down, I'm auditioning for you' and then I went on to sing for her." "How did it go" I asked. "Great" Laura replied, "Carol just said 'you're in' and it was over."

Each of the three "newer choir members" commented on the collaboration between the Valley Chamber Chorale and other artists in the area. The visual artist paired with the choral singers made an impact on the next generation singers.

When I asked Carol if there was anything more to cover she said "my philosophy is to get the best out of each person regardless of age, each singer is an individual. We want to sing with one voice not 40 disparate voices. The singers know what it takes to put on a performance and we enjoy the process of preparing. It is almost as much fun the first night that we rehearse the music as it is the night of a performance - almost" I don't know about you but I believe her, the joy is apparent in their every action. **SL**

Peter McNiff is the editor of Stillwater Living.