

Mentoring on My Mind

By Cynthia Vaughn, Associate Editor for Independent Voices

I have been thinking about all of the people who have encouraged, helped, and mentored me over my career as a voice teacher. Many of those mentors were members of NATS, including “Mr. NATS,” Roy Delp, who served two terms as President of NATS and was the original Director of the NATS Intern Program. Roy Delp was a legend in NATS, and he had a passion for training future generations of voice teachers. As a brand new NATS member in the summer of 1984, I was fresh out of graduate school and attended my first national workshop in Boulder, Colorado. To be honest, it was a bit overwhelming to be in the presence of so many experienced and famous voice teachers from the U.S. and Canada. They all seemed to know each other. The first day, I stood off to the side, taking it all in. Across the room, a tall, authoritative man caught my eyes and walked over to me. I recognized him as President Delp, whose photo I had seen in the *Journal of Singing*. In his booming military voice, he welcomed me, asked where I was from (“Chicago, but originally from Colorado”) and was I a new NATS member



Roy Delp

(“Yes”). He then proceeded to introduce me to other NATS members — not as a student, but as a colleague. I still get goosebumps thinking about that moment. Over the years, I connected with Mr. Delp at every NATS conference and workshop, and he was always genuinely interested in where I was (I moved a lot!) and what I was doing. In the summer of 2001, I was helping my friend

and mentor Linda Snyder as she hosted the NATS Intern Program on the campus of University of Dayton. I had recently relocated from Ohio to Colorado, but I flew back to Dayton for the opportunity to make coffee, run errands, help wherever needed, and to be a fly on the wall for every masterclass, guest lecture, and recital. I loved it! Jean Westerman Gregg was the Director of the Program that year and we shared a dormitory suite, many stories, and a love of Graeter’s ice cream. Roy Delp was one of the Master Teachers and he invited Intern Todd Queen, my Colorado State University colleague, and I to host the NATS Intern Program at CSU in 2004. At that 2004 program, Delp invited me to be the Vocal Literature Coordinator and Publisher’s

Liaison for the NATS Intern Program beginning in 2005, a role I continued through 2012 before passing the torch to Tana Field. There is much to be said about being open to opportunities and simply being in the right place at the right time with the right people.

Other personal mentors have included my Chicago voice teacher Ronald T. Combs, composer Tom Fettke, Robert Edwin, Joan Boytim, and the late Meribeth Dayme, who became a lifelong friend and co-author of *The Singing Book* group-voice textbook and song anthology. Meribeth Dayme died in 2019 and the new fourth edition is dedicated to her memory.



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Modern day colleagues, friends, and yes, mentors, include NATS Executive Director Allen Henderson who invited me to be Associate Editor of NATS *Inter Nos* “Independent Voices” in 2017, and former President Karen Brunssen, friend and international travel buddy, who still inspires me with her relentless drive, creative ideas, and vision for the future.

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In 2019, Karen Brunssen, along with chair Jeanne Goffi-Fynn, Theresa Brancaccio, Carole Blankenship and others spearheaded the first NATS National Mentoring Initiative. “The art of teaching is a complex topic involving content knowledge, communication and organization skills, as well as curiosity about how people learn. Given the variability in both singing pedagogy and how people acquire knowledge, the mentoring initiative committee was founded on the belief that teachers need a wide repertoire of strategies to

address their students and careers.” Along with the well-established NATS Intern Program for early-career professionals, there are other paths for NATS members to connect with mentor teachers/colleagues.

NATS National Mentoring Collaborative (NNMC)

For a fee, NATS members can select an available Mentor Teacher to connect with online in a structured, but flexible collaboration. Over a designated 10-week period, each participant will schedule two one-hour online sessions with a mentor of their choice. Participants also share videos of their teaching OR schedule another collaborative online session to address specific interests or goals. Topics can range from teaching strategies and shared videos for feedback, to career goals such as navigating the transition from adjunct teaching to tenure track, or balancing performance and teaching. NNMC mentees also have the opportunity to connect with other mentor teachers and peers in two scheduled group Zoom meetings.

Conference Connections

Conference Connections, the newly named program formerly known as “Mentoring Over Coffee,” is held during NATS National Conferences. The new name captures the essence of the program, to facilitate connections between NATS members during the biennial national conference. This free program highlights the generous camaraderie of the NATS membership. Elizabeth Ann Benson has directed the program since 2020, following its establishment by Ian Howell in 2018. At the 2024 National Conference in Knoxville, Tennessee, 34 NATS members participated as mentors, and 21 participated as mentees, resulting in 55 mentoring connections. The mentoring partners sat down together to chat for an hour during the conference, fostering new connections within NATS. Responses to a follow-up survey suggest a high level of satisfaction with this program. “Conference Connections is a great example of practicing our [mission, vision, and values](#) within NATS,” Benson says. The connections made through mentoring bolster the [NATS Diversity and Inclusion statement](#), “to be a welcoming and supportive community of members and students who celebrate the unique identities, varied backgrounds, and experiences of all individuals.” (No additional fee for full conference registrants).

Over the past five years, I have had several opportunities to serve as a NATS mentor. One memorable experience



Emily DenBleyker and Cynthia Vaughn

paired me with a teacher who was in her 80s. She was being pressured by well-meaning family and friends to stop teaching and she was having doubts about the effectiveness of her teaching, and her own worth. I listened over lunch as she told me story after story about beloved students whose lives had been changed by her teaching. She began to sit a little taller and smile a little broader. She wanted some suggestions for teaching popular music so that she wasn't “behind the times,” and I steered her towards some great current resources for her and her students. As we ended our conversation, she was confident and re-energized about her own teaching and the value she still brought to her students. She was determined to keep teaching as long as she was physically able and as long as teaching continued to bring her joy. We ended our session with tears and a hug. She inspired me as much as I “mentored” her.

This past year, I connected with NATS member Emily DenBleyker for the National Mentoring Collaborative. When we met online, Emily was an American ex-pat living and teaching online in Lisbon, Portugal. Most of her students joined her on Zoom from the U.S. Emily is a Master of Arts candidate in voice pedagogy, studying online with the Voice Study Centre/University of Wales Trinity Saint David. She is energetic, positive, and passionate about teaching, especially working with beginning adults. Emily was very eager to take the next steps to share her research and writing. We connected immediately! In addition to our three one-hour online Zoom meetings over a period of several weeks, I gave her some options to explore, and she sent me her articles and presentation for feedback. One of her unpublished articles involved quite a bit of research and I suggested that



Cynthia Vaughn and Mary Gard



Cynthia Vaughn with Adam Dyjach



Cynthia Vaughn, Brittnee Simone, Deborah Dalton

she submit it to *Journal of Singing* for consideration. Another article, a how-to for virtual student recitals, was a good fit for “Independent Voice,” and I asked her to submit it to *Inter Nos*. Her article appears in this issue. Earlier, she had submitted a proposal for a conference presentation for the Knoxville 2024 conference that was not accepted, so I suggested that she rework her proposal as a poster paper. Emily was already ahead of me and was in the process of adapting her poster paper submission. I was delighted to finally meet Emily in person at the Knoxville NATS conference and to pose with her next to her selected poster paper! Since our first online meeting, Emily has relocated back to the U.S. and is living and teaching in the Pacific Northwest. No doubt we will stay in touch!

This summer, for the first time, I participated in the volunteer “Conference Connections” mentoring sessions in Knoxville. I had wonderful conversations with NATS members Mary Gard and Adam Dyjach. Mary and I talked about teaching group-voice, and Adam and I explored options to grow his independent studio. Both Mary and Adam were interested in NATS Intern Program, and I was able to give them information and suggestions, most importantly, “Don’t underestimate any portion of the application.” I not only learned about their teaching but also a bit about their personal lives. Congratulations to Adam on his recent wedding!

In addition to these structured opportunities, there is always the opportunity to simply make a new friend at a NATS conference, workshop or regional/chapter event. I kept bumping into Brittnee Simone at the Knoxville conference. We seemed to be attending all of the same sessions, including an invited discussion group for NATS National Mentoring Collaboration participants. When I found out that one of her long-time mentors is my friend and colleague Deborah Dalton, I knew I had an instant friend! That led

to all three of us meeting for dinner and the famed Cruze Farm ice cream. (I’m beginning to think that ice cream is an essential part of mentoring.) So, look around the room, say hello, and be open to a new connection, because ultimately that is what mentoring is about. It is about sharing our collective experiences, listening, respecting, and learning from each other.

I’d love to hear from you! Share some of your best mentoring moments. What are some other ways that NATS might improve mentoring initiatives? What would you most like to receive or give through a mentoring connection? Is there better language that we could use instead of “mentor/mentee”? I’m also seeking email submissions for future issues of *Inter Nos* “Independent Voices.”

In this issue Jeremy Ryan Mossman introduces his work with Feldenkrais, fascia, and biotensegrity. Deborah Conquest discusses how to help students who are disappointed with audition results, and Emily DenBleyker shows us how to plan, produce, and present a pre-recorded virtual recital with online students. Email cynthiavaughn@icloud.com

Cynthia Vaughn, associate editor for *Independent Voices*, has been a proud NATS member since 1983. She has been active in leadership at the chapter and region levels, and was an invited master teacher for the 2020 NATS Intern Program (postponed to 2021 due to COVID). Before moving to Norfolk, Virginia in 2022, Vaughn retired from Magnolia Music Studio, the multi-teacher studio she founded and directed in Colorado and Washington from 2008 to 2022. Previously, she was on the voice faculties of Colorado State University, Cedarville College, and Art Connects International. Publications include *The Singing Book* group-voice textbook and song anthology with co-author Meribeth Dayme. The new 4th edition with editor Matthew Hoch was released July 2024 by Rowman & Littlefield/Bloomsbury Publishing and NATS Books.