



A Vibrant Spirit

by Edmund Lawler

Donna Mitchell makes a mockery of the word “retirement.”

An age-defying force of nature at 70, Mitchell is the hyperkinetic dynamo behind two well-known local musical institutions — School of American Music in Three Oaks, Mich., and Michigan City “Messiah” with its 100-voice choir, 30-piece orchestra and four professional vocalists.

But SAM and “Messiah” are just Mitchell’s day jobs. The retired music educator for LaPorte and New Prairie Unified schools is or has been a vocal soloist for LaPorte County Symphony Orchestra, LaPorte City Band and Michigan City Municipal Band. Her voice has graced Dunes Summer Theatre in Michiana Shores and Footlight Players in Michigan City. She’s a member of Harbor Country Singers. But her voice falls silent when she plays the French horn for the Valparaiso University Community Concert Band.

“I get to sing and play under some of the finest conductors in the area,” Mitchell recounts during a fast-paced chat in Brewster’s Italian Café in New Buffalo. “At Valparaiso University, it’s Dr. Jeff Doebler. For the LaPorte City Band, it’s Director Chuck Steck. And at the ‘Messiah,’ I sing under Maestro Philip Bauman. You can’t ask for more than that. They are top-notch people that I learn from every single day.”



"Donna is donating a ton of time to SAM as well as so many other organizations," Taylor says. "I have seen her personally dig into her pocket many times to help out students. The school pays entry fees for competitions or contributes to scholarships or helps students buy instruments. Some of these things the school can do; some of these things the school can't do."

To help plug the gaps, Mitchell has encouraged others to dig into their wallets and find money to help a student. Taylor adds, "And she manages to do that without shaming someone."

Finally, Taylor notes that Mitchell is a person of faith.

Garth Taylor, SAM's founder and president who recruited Mitchell to be the school's executive director, marvels at the energy and passion she brings to every role.

"Donna burns the candle at all three ends," Taylor says with a chuckle. But, he continues, there's more to her than a vibrant spirit.

"First of all, she is a trained educator and a trained musician with emphasis on the word trained," Taylor says. "I'm an improviser and invent solutions, and I'm only haphazardly trained. When the two of us work together, which we do a lot, we always end up with some kind of combined solution that is totally unique."

Second, he says, Mitchell is a very strong emotional communicator.

"I live in my brain," he says, "and she lives in her heart. We're a good combination there. We do a lot of events, and she is always the first one out of the box the next morning with emails praising the event and thanking the participants."

"This immediate emotional reinforcement communication is really important in a volunteer setting or in a nonprofit setting. It is a special skill to be able to do that and have it be seen as sincere and not just boilerplate."

A third attribute is Mitchell's generosity.



Donna is photographed as part of small ensemble work with School of American Music. Pictured are (from left) Garth Taylor, Dalton Stanage, Donna and Cindy Dryden.

"She is in the American tradition where faith is expressed through good works and not through strict adherence to dogma, but by helping people do actual things," he said. "That is faith through action or faith through living. She is a real living example of that."

He adds, "Donna is an American original. If she were on the national stage, there would be a Ken Burns documentary about her."

Mitchell's faith and her love of music came to her at an early age. Raised primarily in southern Illinois, she was a pastor's daughter and grew up harmonizing gospel music and hymns with her parents, brothers and sisters.



In this undated photo, Donna (wearing glasses and seated in the front) is photographed with family and friends. Donna comically notes that her brother, Alex McEathron, a future Sagamore of the Wabash recipient, is immediately to her right with his lip out.

"When a family harmonizes together, singing just comes naturally," she says. "It put me in good stead for teaching because you really learn on the job how to teach children to sing in two-, three- or four-part harmony."

By the time she was a freshman or sophomore in high school, Mitchell knew she wanted to be a music teacher. She admits she had to break some bad musical habits when she attended college to study music education. She first enrolled at Ozark Christian College in Joplin, Mo., then transferred to Bethel University in Mishawaka, graduating with a bachelor's degree in chorale and general music.

She later did graduate work in guitar and world drumming through workshops offered by Duquesne University in Pittsburgh, along with additional graduate work at VanderCook College of Music in Chicago.

Her first job was as an elementary music teacher at Handley School in LaPorte. Her boss was the legendary Guy Foreman, director of school music for LaPorte Community School Corp. for 35 years, retiring in 1981. He also was the Michigan City Mu-

nicipal Band director for many years. Washington Park's amphitheater is named after him.

"He was a very good musician and a very strict disciplinarian," Mitchell says. "It was good training for someone just out of college because everything had to be meticulously done."

She spent 35 years teaching music and directing choral in the LaPorte and New Prairie districts at the elementary, middle and high school levels, building programs at each level. Her sweet spot was middle school, and she spent 19 years teaching music at New Prairie Middle School.

"I was so tired by the time I retired, I didn't want to teach another lesson," Mitchell recalls. The mother of son Marcus and daughter Renee, and the grandmother to five grandchildren, actually did retire for a couple of years.

But that all ended when she was introduced to Taylor during a planning session for Three Oaks' 2017 sesquicentennial celebration. Fully recuperated from 35 years in the classroom and band room, Mitchell, who lives in Three Oaks with her husband, Chris, was ready to resume the music.

She accepted the position as SAM's executive director. When not running the school's operations, she teaches voice, baritone ukulele and guitar there.

And not long after her work at SAM got under way, "Messiah" came calling.

"Music Director Phil Bauman said that if the Michigan City 'Messiah' were to get grants through the National Endowment for the Arts and other organizations, it would have to be incorporated as a 501(c)(3) not-for-profit with a board of directors with actual roles," Mitchell explained. Bauman asked her to serve as president of the board of directors, a role she continues to play.

"We have decided to grow the program and not just sing at Christmastime, but also singing in the summer with a Baroque concert," she says. "In June, we did Vivaldi's 'Gloria' and two of Handel's coronation choruses."

The first summer concert was held at the 790-seat Holdcraft Performing Arts Center, 1200 Spring St., Michigan City. The 56th annual "Messiah" will be performed at the same venue at 7 p.m. Saturday, Dec. 18, and 3 p.m. Sunday, Dec. 19.

The advantage to staging a summer concert is that it allows the chorus to rehearse nearly year-round, rather than just during the run-up to the winter concert, Mitchell says.

"It was the first event for us ever outside of First Presbyterian Church," she adds. Because of the pandemic, the summer concert's socially distanced attendance was restricted to about 450.

Essentially, "Messiah" has become a year-round operation, which Mitchell must balance with her responsibilities at SAM. And some weeks, like in early November when she graciously carved out an hour from her wall-to-wall schedule for an interview with *The Beacher*, her two worlds collided. With a hearty laugh, Mitchell described her week: "This is the week when the monkey wrenches had babies!"



Donna Mitchell, photographed during the performance run of "Three Oaks Against the World," the village's sesquicentennial production at The Acorn.

But she was heartened by the fact that "I get to go back to being a grandma in about 15 minutes." It's a role she particularly relishes.

And it's one she's about to be pressed into on a more regular basis as her daughter, Renee, a mother of two and music teacher at Hoosier Road Elementary School in Fishers, a northern suburb of Indianapolis, grapples with a recent breast cancer diagnosis.

"Renee just started her battle," Mitchell says somberly. "She's going to have chemo and a bilateral mastectomy."

"I can do SAM, and I can do 'Messiah,' but when you put cancer in the middle of that, it changes the whole dynamic. I need to step back a little bit and make sure Renee understands that I'm there for her."

And when everything turns out all right — as she's absolutely confident it will — Mitchell will likely be back at full force, organizing, leading, singing, playing the French horn and most importantly, learning.

"I'm a person who has always wanted to learn," she said. "That's why I take on so many new things."