



THE LIBERTY SINGERS



WRETHA GRIFFIN LANG

For over two decades, The Liberty Singers, under the direction of Wretha Lang, thrilled residents in Charlotte County, Florida, with their concerts. Her leadership and insistence on high standards in performance created a sound rivaling that of professional groups and earned the support of a grateful community. The story of that ensemble and Lang's life provides an inspiring example of how professional fulfillment can be realized without support from the usual church entities, especially when one has a dream and then pursues it with an unflinching commitment.

The Liberty Singers, a Florida community choral group with a professional sound, began when a neighbor discovered that Wretha Lang, wife of the newly arrived physician in town, was a musician with an extensive musical background. The neighbor joined with local radio

station manager Jack Lotz in 1972 to extend an invitation to Lang to start a community chorus. Lotz offered to advertise auditions on his station and help underwrite the expense for purchasing music.

At the end of the auditions, they needed more men. In response to a contact by Lang, the personnel director

of Medical Center Hospital where her husband was a resident agreed to let participation in the choir be a perk for the hospital's employees. In its earliest beginnings, the Langs personally covered part of the expense for the music. When it appeared the group would survive, Wretha approached the hospital about underwriting music



expenses in return for naming the group The Liberty Singers of Medical Center.

From that beginning in 1972 to 1979, audiences grew to include nearly a thousand. Highlights in those years included performing Handel's *Messiah* in 1974, with members of the Fort Myers Symphony; providing choreography and chorus in support of professional soloists from New York City in a performance of the complete *Mikado* in 1975; and a patriotic salute to the country in 1976. They also presented a concert of excerpts from *Oklahoma* and the *Music Man*, including costumes, acting, and scenery, in 1977 and did highlights from the Easter portion of the *Messiah* with the West Coast Symphony, directed by its conductor Paul Wolf.

Beginning in 1979, Wretha took a four-year break. When she resumed conducting the group in 1983, she continued to provide effective and creative leadership for the next nineteen years. During that time they performed at Disney World, and gave eighteen performances of *Joy Comes in the Morning*, a religious musical drama. In addition to numerous seasonal programs and countless performances in the community, they presented *A Salute to Fred Waring* and a patriotic salute to those from Charlotte County who were serving in the first Gulf War.

The group, now known as the Liberty Singers, had assumed an independent identity apart from the hospital when it had earlier planned a trip to Europe. It received funding from the Arts and Humanities Council of Charlotte County and other area organizations, including the Medical Center Hospital, after its connection with the ensemble ended.

The Liberty Singers recorded two albums in 1995, titled *Slice of*

Americana and *Faith is Like a Child*. Both CDs evidence in a striking way a sound and quality of performance rivaling that of the best of professional choral ensembles.

In 1998, the group performed a fully staged version of *Oklahoma!* in the county Civic Auditorium, assisted by a sixteen piece orchestra. The following year, Linda Salisbury, in an editorial in the *Charlotte Herald-Tribune*, spoke of the reputation enjoyed by the ensemble and the contribution it had made to the community:

The Liberty Singers are remarkable for many reasons. The first is the group's vocal excellence and blend of voices. The choral group also enjoys a cohesiveness that comes from the longevity of many singers. Four members have been with it since the beginning Through the years the Liberty Singers have performed great sacred and secular music - sometimes up to twenty performances a year.

Sometimes they have turned their concerts into fund-raisers for good causes. One program featured the musical talents of local attorneys to help raise money to alleviate world hunger. Another featured area preachers, to bring into bring in funds for the United Way.

Wretha was born in North Carolina to an Adventist evangelist and moved frequently during her childhood. Her family was musical, her mother being an aunt of Wayne Hooper, and she began singing in a family quartet at age two.

She started academy at Glendale Academy in California and graduated from the academy at Southwestern Junior College in Texas in 1952 at age 15. That summer she attended a workshop at Westminster Choir College that made a deep impression on her. She recalls,

It was a two-week workshop conducted by John Finley Williamson. Merritt Schumann, choir director at Southwestern at the time and an inspiration to me, was also in attendance. After leaving the college, he arranged to have me travel to Campion Academy [in Colorado] to sing the Messiah solos with his choir. I had first performed those solos at age 15 and then continued doing them annually, singing as many as three performances of both the Christmas and the Easter portions, until I was 33.

She continued as a college student at SWJC for a year, before transferring to Union College. Following a year there, the family moved to California, where she started directing choral groups under Oliver Beltz, director of the music program for the Loma Linda University Church, and continued when Patrick Hicks succeeded him. When Hicks pursued graduate study in the summers in the late 1950s and early 1960s, Wretha directed the choir from June to September, an experience she would later recall as being invaluable.

She worked to pay off college bills before deciding to return to UC to resume her studies. In the year she returned, she met Robert D. Lang, who was planning on a career as a physical therapist. When he left for study at the medical school at Loma Linda, Wretha returned to her home in Loma Linda and continued her studies at La Sierra College, studying under John T. Hamilton and Harold Hannum. She found Hamilton's approach in presenting his choirs to be instructive, later observing, "I learned from him how to bring an audience to its feet."

She completed a B.A. degree with an emphasis on church music in 1959, the same year in which Robert completed his studies in physical therapy. They married that summer and stayed in the area.

Following the birth of their second child, Robert returned to college to



complete the prerequisites for entering medical school and then continued study towards a medical degree. While he continued his schooling, she taught piano and voice lessons in their home and was a frequent soloist at the LLU church and with the Vincent Mitzelfelt Chorale, singing the soprano solos in many performances of numerous major choral works. She also simultaneously held church music positions at the Azure Hills SDA Church and a San Bernardino Presbyterian church.

During that time she also worked with four other singers to produce a recording used to accompany a textbook on music appreciation for use in Adventist schools worldwide. Wayne Hooper invited her to sing with himself, tenor Bob Edwards, alto LuAnne Strachan, and soprano Bunny Phillips Thornburgh to complete this project.

In 1969, the Langs moved to Orlando, Florida, where Robert completed his internship. In their year in Orlando, their four children, ranging in age from four to nine, sang frequently as a family quartet in area SDA churches and won a talent show that year at the hospital singing songs from *Oliver*. She also started a girls' chorus, which continued for ten years after they left.

The Lang family then moved to Charlotte County in Southwest Florida, where Robert served at the Medical Center Hospital as the emergency room physician for a year. Before entering private practice, Wretha was contacted during this time to form the community choral group.

While it is true the community benefited from her leadership of the Liberty Singers, she herself found musical fulfillment and gained many friends from this experience. In 1999, when she attempted to retire as director of the ensemble, Lang, reflected on her

years with the group, observing:

Getting acquainted with people in this community has been a marvelous part of my life. I fell in love with this place. Outstanding people became participants in Liberty Singers "gigs" and supported our activities way beyond the "call of duty."

They are amazing people! Almost half of the existing group today has been in it for twenty years. It has given me the opportunity to develop a certain



choral sound with them and that is what has kept me going. They are not cliquish, however, and have welcomed new members enthusiastically.

When Lang finally retired, she received numerous tributes at her final concert in April. Naomi Donson, art critic at the *Sarasota Herald-Tribune* noted that the most significant tribute was a memorable performance by the group that sent the "director out in style." Later that month, the University Club of Charlotte gave her its Genesis Award, a high honor in that community, for her leadership in enriching the cultural life of Charlotte County and the surrounding area.

Through the years, Lang also continued her work as a church musician, now having led the music program at the Port Charlotte

SDA church for thirty years. She was able to take a break in 1999 after serving in that capacity for 28 years, when Marvin Robertson, dean of the school of music and choir director at Southern Adventist University for 33 years, retired and moved to the area and assumed that responsibility. She returned to that post when he left the area in 2006.

Both the Liberty Singers and her church choir were known for the quality of their singing as well as for the blend of their voices. Those who have studied voice with her or listened to her students know firsthand the excellence of her work as a voice teacher.

Beginning in 1979, Lang developed a troubling speech problem that reduced her speaking to a whisper and ended her career as a singer. It has been a frustrating experience for one whose voice in earlier years enabled her to freely express her musical feelings in a way that inspired so many.

She recently wrote about another experience that helped her spiritually and allowed her to inspire others:

In 1998 God impressed me to develop a Bible reading plan which is topically and chronologically arranged as far as possible. It enabled me to read the Bible completely through in a very short time for the first time in my life. I thought God gave that plan just for me! But in 2003-4, Mark Bond produced a website for me so I could share my plan. www.thisislifeternal.org

Over 30 countries and seven universities have visited the site. It's an incredible and amazing journey I'm on! Now I pray that God will bring people to want to know Him better and read the scriptures and find the wonderful truths that I hold dear. I like to think that my life began in 1998, for God's Word has blessed my life abundantly!

Dan Shultz