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Singing for the dying

BY BLAIR POLLOCK

It is said that the sense of the hearing is the last to go when one is dying.

The Threshold Singers bear that in their hearts and minds as they sing softly and intimately to those preparing to leave this life. As the name suggests, the Threshold Singers attend the sick and dying and their families at local hospices, nursing homes, hospital and private homes, giving their voices to bring comfort and ease fear and pain.

The revolving group of about a dozen local singers from Chapel Hill and Durham that makes up the local branch of Threshold Singers began in 2007. They are part of what is now an international movement started in the early 2000s in California by Kate Munger to bring their voices to those lying in their beds awaiting what's next. In 2007 Munger went to Kannapolis on request to train a group of Threshold singers. From there, she was invited to the Triangle.

I found out about the local group quite by accident while at dinner with friends. Annie, their teenage daughter's friend, mentioned she had to leave the dinner to help put together music for the Threshold Singers. Being ever curious, I asked what the Threshold Singers were about. Annie gave me the leader's contact info.




Soon after I got the news that a friend of mine was dying, but didn't quite connect the two events. As he was nearing his end, I found the slip of paper with Threshold leader, Debbie Cohen's phone number. I contemplated asking her to sing for his passing, but e-mail coming from his family asked us not to contact them or call. I was stymied. My friend passed on shortly afterwards, well attended by his own crew of singers, drummers and close comrades.

Instead, I later asked Debbie if I could hear them sing at an appropriate time, perhaps with a family's permission. She graciously invited me to hear the Threshold singers at a different kind of threshold event - an 89th birthday party for her singing mate Susan Siegel's mom, Bebe. So my first experience of the Threshold Singers came at Bebe Siegel's birthday party in the lobby of Wynwood, an assisted living facility in Durham.



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Six women showed up to sing that Saturday. Dressed casually they informally grouped around Bebe in her wheelchair at the center of the room. With daughter Susan doubling on guitar, the six gave a brief, warm and intimate concert. Though her hearing is impaired, Bebe beamed throughout and sang along with some of her favorites like "Carolina in the Morning," "You Are My Sunshine," "Sunrise Sunset" and "California Here I Come".

The singers didn't neglect anyone else who had come to hear and celebrate. Singing in harmony as they walked through the room, each one would stop and hold an old hand or lean in and join in duet with anyone who seemed to be singing along. Invariably big smiles graced everyone's faces. Songs crossed cultural and temporal boundaries from wordless Jewish nigguns, to Beatles, Amazing Grace and Forties love songs. Debbie contributed her own optimistic and delightful number, "It's a New, New Day" .

The singers weren't performing so much as communing with Bebe and the others in the room. "It's prayer, not performance," Debbie told me when we talked of the true nature of their work. To demonstrate, four of them surrounded me during the interview and sang "Water in the Well" softly, as they would to someone truly on the Threshold. It gave me peace and at the same time a calm energy.

After that brief personal introduction to the work, it was easy to believe the singers' reports of dramatic changes they'd seen in some of the gnarled, hunched, twisted, seemingly incommunicative people to whom they'd sung. A July 4 New York Times article on musical hospice care amplifies this sentiment.

This isn't easy work. Anne Ringland, one of singers at the birthday, told me she'd trained a year to do it. It's a lot harder than performing. In learning to do the work, each singer has to lie down and play the part of a dying listener. Their monthly meeting includes self-examination and training new members as well as learning new songs. As all the Threshold groups, the local one trains with hospice workers in how to be with the dying. For a full year, they sang every Thursday night at one local hospice until bureaucratic complications that ensued after a change in ownership ended that.

Threshold singers view what they do as an offering as well as prayer. ember Amy Sindermann who admitted to having "the world's worst bedside manner," found her Threshold voice singing to her dying father. That singing, she told me, enabled her to set outside herself and communicate with him in way she hadn't been able to during his illness. More than one of the singers said they'd felt their selves disappear as they did this work.

These same sentiments were echoed by the local Threshold group's founder, Jude Casseday, who had initially invited Kate Munger to the Triangle and drew together singers from many different area choruses to learn the Threshold way to be with the dying. Sing softly, keep it simple are key premises. In Jude's words, "It seems like a brilliant and obvious way to offer comfort in a time that's difficult for most. "

Threshold singers would love to assist those who could use their help. There is no charge for this. You may reach them at through Jude at 919-408-9404 or email: Debbie@octree.com

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