

Us

————— The Official Magazine of *The Peterborough Singers*

**FROM LOSS TO LEGACY: SYD BIRRELL
REFLECTS ON HIS LIFE AND CAREER**

**EXCERPTS FROM YA CAN'T LET
CANCER RUIN YOUR DAY**

**FINDING HOME IN MUSIC:
SURVIVING, SINGING, & STARTING OVER**

SYD BIRRELL RETIREMENT EDITION

PETERBOROUGH
SINGERS 

US MAGAZINE

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"THERE ARE HUNDREDS OF STORIES OF HOW THIS CHOIR HAS CHANGED LIVES AND OUR COMMUNITY FOR THE BETTER."

MESSAGE FROM

THE BOARD CHAIR

When I look out from the choir loft at a Peterborough Singers concert, what I see are stories. Hundreds of them.

Each of those 120 choristers singing their hearts out has a story about why they give up every Wednesday evening to choir rehearsal. And then there are the 700 audience members, many with tears in their eyes as they sing along to the Hallelujah chorus or the Christmas carols.

That's 820 stories. Or, rather, 821. I left out the man on the podium: Syd Birrell. Now, there's a story!

That's why we've decided to create "Us" magazine: to tell stories of people who have been touched by The Peterborough Singers, choir members and audience members alike. In this inaugural issue we share just a few of these stories (above all, the story of Syd's 35 years of service), knowing that we could easily write a book.

I hope by the time you finish reading you will begin to see what I see when I look out at our concerts: hundreds of stories of how this choir has changed lives and our community for the better. And hopefully you will have a newfound appreciation for the gift that is my friend, Syd Birrell.



CAREY GIBSON, BOARD CHAIR



MESSAGE FROM SYD BIRRELL

My wife, Pam, and I didn't start the Peterborough Singers with a strategic plan, a branding session, or a vision statement.

We began with a crazy question: "I wonder if anyone in Peterborough would like to join an auditioned choir that demands the highest standards of musicianship; a choir in a small city that would rival big city choirs; a choir that dreams big?"

Over the past 35 years, hundreds of choristers have answered this question with a resounding "yes!" They came with music in their hearts, and a willingness to trust some guy waving his hands around at the front of the room. They found community, discovered their voices, sold tickets, and built the necessary organizational structure.

And they sang their hearts out. We sang our first St. Matthew Passion, proving to ourselves that we could do anything we set our minds to. We sang to packed houses. We moved audiences to tears. We moved ourselves to tears. And I got to stand in front of them the whole time, and see the dream come true.

And then came the time of tragedy, when cancer hit my family... twice. The choir and audience embraced us throughout those five years of battling cancer.

They walked beside us, and then they comforted us in our great loss. I will never forget conducting Handel's *Messiah* on the eve of my son's death, and then returning home to sit by the bedside of my little boy as he battled through his last few hours in this world.

I have since come to understand that everyone singing in the choir that night, and listening in the audience, was profoundly changed. The *Messiah* was already precious to us. But now, it became essential. We needed it in our healing journey.

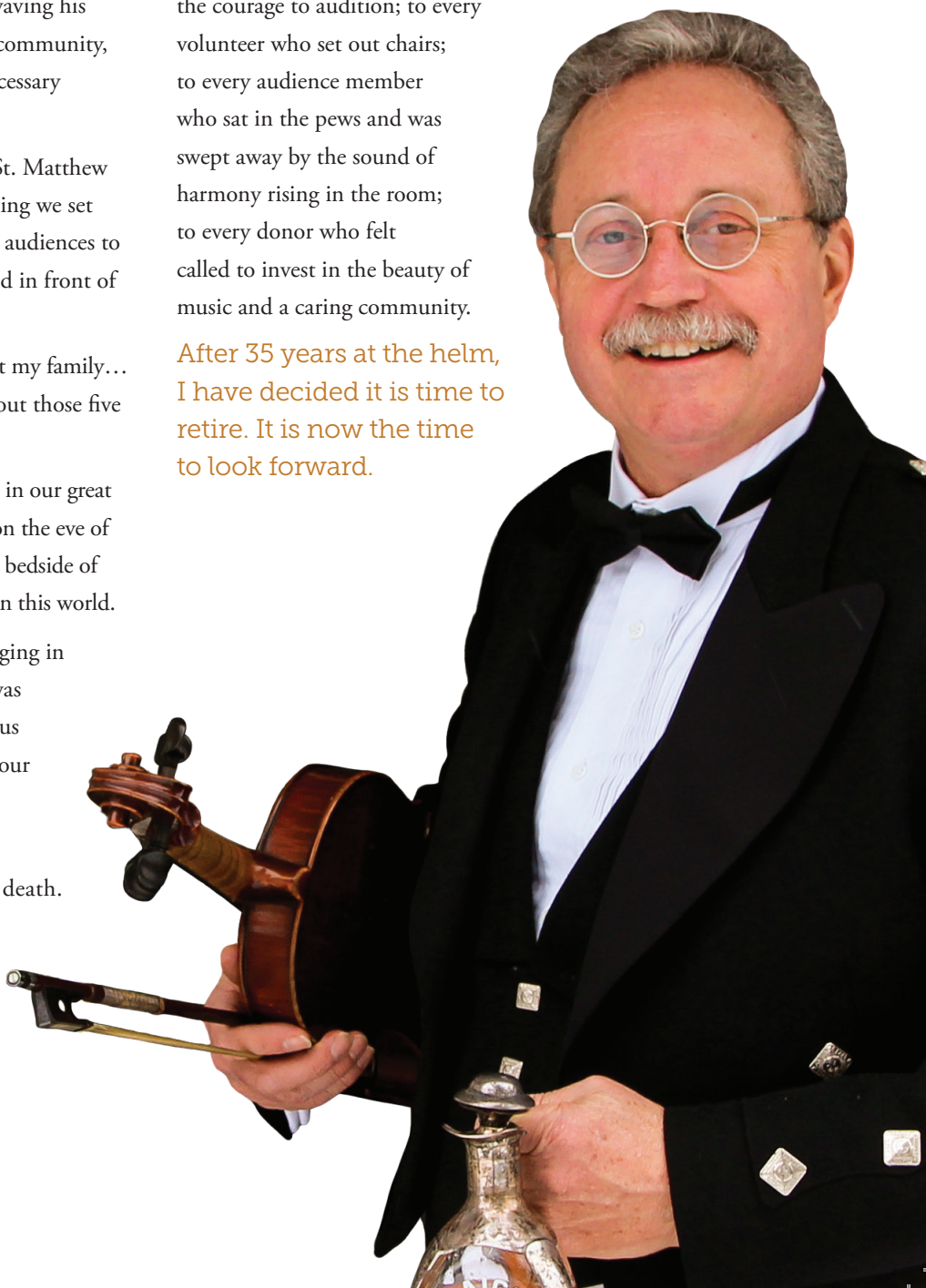
That transformation has spilled into all our performances over the twenty-five years since James' death. Something is different when we sing. It is James' legacy.

There have been many newcomers to the choir since then. They immediately feel that there is something different and magical about the Peterborough Singers.

Choral excellence is still expected. But, perhaps there is a feeling that it is ok to be vulnerable, to bring one's own journey to the singing experience. And we are the better for it.

The Peterborough Singers isn't really mine. It never was. It belongs to every chorister who found the courage to audition; to every volunteer who set out chairs; to every audience member who sat in the pews and was swept away by the sound of harmony rising in the room; to every donor who felt called to invest in the beauty of music and a caring community.

After 35 years at the helm, I have decided it is time to retire. It is now the time to look forward.



Because, *the music must go on*, even when I'm no longer the one at the helm. The choristers deserve that. You deserve that.

After all, this is *your* choir. And I'm counting on you to help keep the dream alive, by continuing to spread the word, attending concerts, and by supporting the Syd Birrell Legacy Fund.

My hope for the fund is that it will ensure that the Singers is still here, 35 years from now: different, perhaps, under a new director, but still shooting for the stars, and still showcasing how a choir can make our city a better, more beautiful, more connected place.



SYD BIRRELL, ARTISTIC DIRECTOR

"BECAUSE THE
MUSIC MUST GO
ON, EVEN WHEN
I'M NO LONGER
THE ONE AT THE
HELM."

Credit—Clifford Skarstedt





FROM LOSS TO LEGACY

SYD BIRRELL REFLECTS ON HIS LIFE AND VARIED CAREER

BY LANCE ANDERSON, THE PETERBOROUGH EXAMINER

*Syd Birrell returns to his sunroom table carrying an old green binder filled with well-worn sheet music of the Handel's *Messiah* score. On the front, an oval photo of his son James is taped to the centre. His bright, smiling face is framed by two dates — the day James was born and the day he died. Beneath the photo is a quote that has, and continues to have, a major impact on how Birrell lives his life.*

"Dad, I've been thinking' that every day is like a precious gift. You gotta use every day." **JAMES BIRRELL**

It seems fitting that this powerful quote from young James is affixed to the front of Birrell's binder that he uses each December when he conducts the Peterborough Singers as they perform *Messiah*, a highlight for many during the Christmas season.

December's annual concert later this year will mark the final time Birrell will lead his choir in this performance, a fitting end to a 35-year-career as the Peterborough Singers' founder and conductor. Birrell has chosen this concert as his last for a reason. It has meaning and connection for himself and his family that goes back to the night James died.

It was Dec. 17, 2001. James, 8, was at home dying from neuroblastoma, a rare nerve cancer that was about to steal his childhood and shatter the Birrell family, leaving them, and the Peterborough community, grieving.

"He's in the family room here on his bed. We can't touch him. He's in too much pain to even touch," recalled Birrell. "It's Dec. 17, I'm scheduled to conduct the *Messiah* and I have a replacement standing by in case I can't make it. But Pam and James both said, 'Go and conduct *Messiah*,' so, I went."

The choir knew what was going on, as did many in the audience. Birrell was very open with the journey his son and family were on, detailed in regular emails he sent to friends and supporters. After a very moving, emotional concert, Birrell went home. "And my son dies that night," he said. The impact that concert had on the audience and the choir will never be forgotten. There was new meaning to the *Messiah* performance that night because of James. It has also made the Peterborough Singers a special group to be part of indeed.

“It’s OK to bring your grief to the Peterborough Singers... it’s a healing place,” said Birrell. And that’s why retiring from the choir is a difficult prospect for Birrell, but he knows now is the time. With the choir in a good position, and he himself now 71 years of age, he admits it’s time to pass on the torch, but that doesn’t make it any easier.

“The choir has stood beside me and beside my family throughout various tragedies. The music we made together was a huge part in keeping me going.”

The formation of the Peterborough Singers dates to 1990. After 15 years of playing piano for the Peterborough Symphony Chorus, Birrell’s wife Pam, an accomplished singer in her own right, suggested Birrell talk to the Peterborough Symphony Orchestra (PSO) about starting a year-round auditioned choir. The PSO agreed and concerts, that ended up selling out, were planned. Two years later, the group separated from the PSO, recalled Birrell, and the Peterborough Singers set out on their own.

The years that followed were filled with successful concerts featuring renowned guest performers. The Singers’ reputation

spans Canada and beyond. People want to come here and perform, said Birrell.

Birrell’s focus to build the choir into a success is no different than anything else he takes on in life. Be it his real estate endeavours to his organ playing at churches — including St. Peter’s in Cobourg, where he plays today, and at Lakefield College School — Birrell’s success comes down to a drive and willingness to take risks that many would shy away from.

“When I’m waking up, there is a solution in my mind to something that was stealing my sleep. And I don’t know where that comes from,” said Birrell.

BEGINNINGS IN PETERBOROUGH

Perhaps it’s his drive to succeed that can be traced back to his days at a boarding school in England when he was 12 years age. After moving around as a child, living in places like Sarnia, Montreal, Niagara Falls and even East Pakistan for a couple of years, his parents sent him to school in England to continue his education.

Birrell’s father, Bruce, was a professional engineer and war veteran who helped rebuild the Bombay docks after an explosion during the Second World War. “My mom, Primrose, was a highly talented woman who was brought up in the British tradition of looking after your husband and

servicing your house,” said Birrell, adding she was also a talented secretary who worked for lawyers and the British Council while in East Pakistan.

Eventually, Birrell’s parents returned to Canada to settle at their Haliburton-area cottage. Birrell continued with his education and career. At 19, he went to the Royal College of Music, where he sang in the choir and learned to play organ. He had taken piano lessons for much of his life and gravitated to the organ due, in part, to his father. “I grew up with my dad being an amateur organist, sitting on the organ bench as he played at the local church,” said Birrell.

While he considered a career in engineering, Birrell was guided into a music profession. He remembers being asked why he would consider becoming an engineer when he spent all his spare time practicing organ. So, he enrolled in the Royal College of Music. While there, Birrell had church jobs playing organ in London. After he got his degree, he returned to Canada to live with his parents and started teaching piano in high school.

Then an old friend from boarding school reached out. His friend was singing in the St. James Cathedral in Toronto and invited him down for a visit. Unbeknownst to him, that cathedral visit turned into a job interview of sorts when the church’s



Credit—Clifford Skarstedt



Tony (left) and
Syd (right) Birrell

organist showed up. He had been asked by St. John's Anglican Church on Brock Street in Peterborough to help find an organist, preferably English-trained. Birrell fit the bill.

That led Birrell to Peterborough in 1975, where he lived with a group of Trent students in a house they rented. It was a great time, recalled Birrell, adding the group wanted to keep living together. So, a year later, Birrell used six credit cards to scrounge up enough money for a down payment to purchase a home on Rubidge Street.

The real estate agent he worked with approached Birrell a few months later saying she had another student house property if he was interested. He wasn't, but to sweeten the pot, the owner agreed to drop the price to what Birrell was willing to pay if he would give a private organ recital for his family and friends. Now with two houses, the agent came back with new properties every year until Birrell eventually had amassed six student housing properties he managed. Every summer was spent renovating, said Birrell.

In addition to the student housing business, Birrell also landed a job as organist at Lakefield College School, where he still plays, and started a company to import high-end organs to churches. He ended up supplying organs to 65 churches across Ontario.

TRAGEDY AND TRIUMPHS

Birrell and his wife Pam successfully managed their businesses, all while dealing with many challenges throughout their lives. They married in 1984 after meeting while Pam was a singer and Birrell a piano player. Soon after they were wed, Birrell's brother Tony suffered a catastrophic water-skiing accident. This had a profound impact on the Birrells, who took up the fight to win a settlement for Tony while managing his care and looking after him for 39 years until his death, just 18 months ago.

Birrell said Tony was blind and was water skiing with a group that organizes water skiing trips for the visually impaired. Tony was towed into the back of a ski jump at high speed and was in a coma for six months. "(When he woke) it was just so awful. He couldn't see. He had no short-term memory," said Birrell.

After years of fighting, the Birrells won a lawsuit and against all professional advice they bought a home for Tony on King Street with round-the-clock care.

All the while, Pam faced her own health scare in the 1990s after being diagnosed with breast cancer. And then they were faced their son James' diagnosis of neuroblastoma, that sent the family down yet another path.

Following his death, they formed the James Fund For Neuroblastoma Research. That fund ended up raising millions

of dollars. In 2014, the Birrells announced they were passing over the reins of the James Fund to the SickKids Foundation. The foundation continues to keep James' legacy going to this day.

THANK YOU

And through all of this, the pillar for the Birrells has been the Peterborough Singers. It has been their strength and constant outlet that has brought joy and support for more than three decades.

It's safe to say that the choir will always hold a special place in their hearts. "I want to thank you all for providing me with the privilege of 35 years of extraordinary music making... and for the support you have given me and my family through Pam's cancer and then James' cancer and death, and the dark years that followed," said Birrell.

As much as the Birrells hold the choir dear, so do its members. Following his retirement announcement, one choir member sent a message to Birrell. It read, "I'm overcome with deep gratitude for everything you have done for me, musically and far beyond. Being part of the Peterborough Singers is a central part of my world and has brought great meaning to my life. Thank you so much, Syd."

This biography first appeared in The Peterborough Examiner, and is reprinted here with their generous permission.





\$6.7 MILLION DOLLARS
RAISED BY *THE JAMES
FUND SO FAR...*

EXCERPTS FROM
**YA CAN'T LET CANCER
RUIN YOUR DAY**

BY SYD BIRRELL

Editor's note:

After the Birrells' son, James, was diagnosed with neuroblastoma in 1997, Syd began writing regular e-mails to friends and family, providing updates. Soon, however, word of the Birrell family's plight got out. Suddenly, total strangers were asking to be added to the mailing list. Lots of them.

Eventually, the subscriber list grew into the tens of thousands. Among them was the actor Tom Hanks, from whom the family has received numerous type-written letters from all across the globe over the years. Along the way, the Birrell family created "The James Fund," a foundation dedicated to funding life-saving research on neuroblastoma. And after James' death, Syd gathered the e-mails into a book, which has now gone into multiple printings.

*The following are condensed excerpts from the book. To order a copy of *Ya Can't Let Cancer Ruin Your Day* e-mail singers@peterboroughsingers.com*



FORWARD BY TOM HANKS

Over the telephone, the voice of a little boy carries only his enthusiasm for the subject of the conversation—rocket ships, movies, railroad trains, and the other stuff that boys find fascinating. There is not talk of the doctor reports, the statistics, or the schedule of treatments—just the questions and opinions that blurt forth from the mouth and mind of a little boy like James Birrell.

The photographs will give you hints of his struggle, some more evident than others. But even in the pictures you can spot the obvious signs of a happy kid in love with life as much as he is in love with his family... [T]hese emails will allow you the pleasure of getting to know the little boy behind the cocked engineer's cap. He'll find a place in your heart as well. And like all great loves, James will be there forever.

Tom Hanks

SENT: DECEMBER 18, 2001 | 12:54 AM

SUBJECT: HANDEL'S MESSIAH

Rebecca and Auntie Diana and I returned from Handel's *Messiah* in a wonderful post-concert state of euphoria. James had been quiet and comfortable all day. Pam had urged me to go, to conduct the performance for James and for her, and so I did.

It was so good to hear the choir, to hear the soloists. The old words took on new meaning for all of us, musicians and audience alike, as we all thought of James,

right from the moment the tenor began singing the opening phrase, "*Comfort Ye.*" How was it possible to have performed this work so many times before and missed so much of the message? What a gift it was to me.

All was instantly shattered as we walked in the front door. "*How is James?*" we ask as we enter. "*Not good for the last hour.*" But I have no need to ask as I hear his crying and whimpering. The pain has returned with a vengeance. ... It's 3:30 a.m. now, and I have been back to James' bedside... Auntie Peggy clasps his hand between hers and talks of angels, and heaven, and many things. Please may he be there soon...

SENT: DECEMBER 18, 2001 | 6:12 AM

SUBJECT: JAMES

James just died. Syd.

SENT: DECEMBER 20, 2001 | 1:48 AM

SUBJECT: PEACE, DIGNITY RESTORED

Ever since my son was diagnosed with cancer, some words have found a resonance in my head, words that surface unexpectedly ... words cried out loud three thousand or so years ago by a father who has just lost his son. ... King David's son, Absalom, leading a rebellion against his father, is killed, and when news reaches the king, he cries, "*O my son Absalom! My son, my son Absalom! If only I had died instead of you—O Absalom,*

my son, my son!" (2 Samuel 18:33, NIV). ...O my son James! O James, my son... today the words are no longer resonating in my head, but instead they are gripping my heart. They have become intensely personal.

Tomorrow, the burial. Many wonderful memories of the day help ease the pain that is seared on our minds from sitting as helpless observers of his final hours. And as I go to bed, I am faced with a choice. Will I dwell on the pain, or will I dwell in that beautiful picture of James resting peacefully with children playing happily round about? I choose the latter.

SENT: DECEMBER 7, 2002 | 5:17 AM

SUBJECT: ONE YEAR

The big anniversary is fast approaching, and many of you have been gently providing advance support. ...

I find that lately I have gotten into the habit of rereading the email narratives of a year ago, each one an anniversary of a sort.

...December 17th, I leave home for three hours to conduct Handel's *Messiah*, to date the most powerful musical experience of my life. "*Comfort ye my people,*" the soloist sings, the first of many familiar words that take on stunning new meaning for me.

WHY ARE THE PETERBOROUGH SINGERS SO GOOD?

When guest soloists or audience members first hear the 100+ voices of The Peterborough Singers in full flight, they often looked stunned. Their reactions, a point of pride for members of the choir, arise from a common thought: *A small-town choir just isn't supposed to be this good!*

The unusually high artistic standards the choir consistently achieves can be traced back to a decision that Syd and Pam made when they founded the choir, back in 1990. At that time, the Singers was a sub-group of the Peterborough Symphony Orchestra (PSO). Their one job was to sing for the orchestra's *Messiah* performance.

This arrangement created a frustrating hamster wheel for Syd. An ever-shifting roster of singers would show up every year, and then have to be rehearsed to sing the difficult oratorio. Eventually, Pam suggested that Syd create a stand-alone choir, which would have a stable membership, and which could expand into more performances.

It was at this point that Syd and Pam decided to do something risky: they would make the Singers an auditioned choir, with choristers expected to have a high standard of musical training and ability. The goal? To create a choir that could rival many of the best choirs in Canada.

When Syd auditioned the 70 or so singers who had been coming out to sing the *Messiah*, only 17 passed their audition. This was a problem. Syd had hoped to build a choir of at least 40. With only 17 to work with, was the new venture going to be dead on arrival, scuttled by an unrealistically high standard?

Those fears quickly vanished. Within days, recalls Syd, word spread like wildfire around the Peterborough arts community. While Peterborough had a robust tradition of community singing, none of the existing choirs were auditioned. Because of this, many of the most serious singers in Peterborough were routinely commuting into Toronto to participate in choirs like the Toronto

Mendelsohn Choir. When these singers heard about Syd's plan, they were thrilled. No more commute. And even better, this choir would belong to Peterborough.

Within short order Syd had far more than his looked-for group of 40. Within just a few years, the choir was pushing 100 singers. Today, it sits at over 130.

In the very first year of the choir's existence, the Singers hired the internationally-renowned Elmer Iseler to guest-conduct a performance of *Carmina Burana*. Syd describes the decision to bring Iseler to Peterborough as showing an "unbelievable cheekiness." But the gamble paid off. Suddenly, recounts Syd, "the choir that everybody is saying is incredible goes one step further and brings in the premier conductor of the time."

The concert sold out. And the Singers' reputation for artistic excellence was cemented.

Since the beginning, Syd has also pursued two other, complementary goals: firstly, to attract world-class soloists to Peterborough, and secondly, to help jump-start the careers of emerging Canadian artists.

When the Singers put on their first oratorio other than the *Messiah* — Mozart's *Requiem* — they snagged one of the top singers in the country, bass-baritone Gary Relier. Ever since then, Peterborough has been an unlikely, but much-cherished stop for a revolving door of top-tier soloists. Many of them are so taken with the Singers, and with what one soloist (tenor Chris Mayell) calls Syd's "legendary hospitality," that they say they can't wait for the next invitation to sing.



Among the many vocal stars who have joined the Singers over the years are soprano Isabel Bayrakdarian (famous for many reasons, but perhaps best known for singing on the *Lord of the Rings* soundtrack), bass-baritone Russell Brawne, Michael Burgess (who sang as the Phantom of the Opera in Toronto), tenor Benjamin Butterfield, and soprano Natalie Choquette.

Meanwhile, Syd has forged a relationship with tenor Darryl Edwards, who teaches at the University of Toronto. Every year Edwards alerts Syd as to who his top vocal students are. Syd then auditions them for roles in Singers shows. As a consequence,

numerous vocalists who have gone on to illustrious national and international careers had one of their first paid gigs performing with the Singers. This includes luminaries such as soprano Measha Brueggergosman and counter-tenor Dan Taylor, among many others.

Finally, there is the “secret sauce” of so many of the Singers’ performances: Juno-award-winning organist Ian Sadler.

Put all these various elements together, and what you get is an answer to the question implied in the amazed faces of so many soloists and first-time concertgoers: *How is this choir so good?*



WHAT'S DEATH GOT TO DO WITH IT?

THE SECRET LIFE OF THE SINGERS' BUSINESS MANAGER, PEG MCCRACKEN

In late 2014, renowned physician and long-time Peterborough Singers member Joyce Barrett lay in the palliative care wing at Peterborough's hospital. She was dying of stage four cancer.

It was the evening of December 15, the night of the Singers' annual *Messiah* concert. After the final, exuberant notes of the encore of the Hallelujah chorus had faded away, and the audience had filed out into the snowy night, dozens of the singers bundled up and headed to the hospital. Half an hour later, Joyce was wheeled into a room large enough to contain the group of 50 or so who made the trek.

The singers launched into one of the most famous sections of the *Messiah*. Thus began a private *Messiah* concert, just for Joyce, her family, and the handful of hospital workers who poked their heads in, stunned amazement on their faces.

Death might not seem to be a topic to highlight in a magazine celebrating Syd and the Singers. Wouldn't it be better to focus on lighter, more inspiring stories? Maybe. But that would be to ignore much of what makes the Singers what it is. As Syd has so often said, the shared journey through his son James' illness and death shaped the Singers what it is today: a deeply soulful and uniquely compassionate community.

And then, of course, while we're on the topic of death, there's the Singers' business manager, Peg McCracken. When Syd and Pam decided to found the Peterborough Singers 35 years ago, Peg was one of the first people on the scene to help. She was struck, she says, by the clarity and ambitiousness of Syd's vision. She believed in it. She began volunteering. And she continued to volunteer, for the next 20 years. Eventually, the Singers wised up, and hired her.

But, what most people may not know is that, for the past 50 years, Peg has volunteered in hospice. She began doing so in her early 20s, in Toronto, she says, after she realized that death did not seem to disturb her as much as it did others. In part, she credits her faith for this. But ultimately, this realization led her to recognize that she had a gift to offer others.

In the past 50 years, she has accompanied dozens of people through the process of dying. Her job, as she puts it, is just "to be a listening ear, a helpful hand, a kind word, a warm heart, and to just embrace the situation for all its messiness." The first client she ever worked with was a Scot, who had been given three weeks to live. However, at their first meeting, he declared to Peg that, as a Scot, he was stubborn and had no intention of dying any time soon. He lived another fifteen years. In the intervening years they grew so close that he became godfather to

one of Peg's children, and would frequently join the family for Thanksgiving dinner.

Peg never dreamed how useful her knowledge and experience would be for the Birrells. By the time their son James was diagnosed with neuroblastoma, an unusually lethal form of cancer, Peg already had a close relationship with the Birrells, and with James in particular. Then began an extraordinary, and ultimately heartbreaking, five-year journey.

Peg and her son Ehren were among the few who were present at James' bedside on the night that he died. Looking back at that time, Peg says, with tears in her eyes, "I wouldn't trade one second of that journey for anything." She adds, "I still feel after 50 years volunteering in hospice, that it is an incredible gift that someone gives you by allowing you to walk that journey with them. And never more so than with James."

The depth of Peg's compassionate concern for the dying is expressed in how she prefers to spend her spare time. She can't speak too highly of Peterborough's new hospice building. "I like to end my week there, every Friday night," she says. While hanging out in hospice might not be everybody's idea of a great Friday night, she says, in all seriousness, "It's the most joyful, uplifting place... The things that I have experienced in that building since it was built have been the most heartwarming moments in my life in many ways."

But what does all this have to do with the choir? Everything, says Peg. It's by being faced with the more challenging areas of life, she says, that the choir has become so much more than a choir. Care for the sick and downtrodden is in its DNA.

Joyce Barrett died a few weeks after the impromptu *Messiah* concert at the hospital. Her family has since become one of the Singers' biggest supporters, creating the Joyce Barrett Fund to keep Syd's vision alive, so that more people can experience the life-transforming and healing power of music that gave joy to Joyce in life, and comforted her in death.

Asked what the primary lesson is that she has learned as a hospice volunteer, Peg says: "There isn't a single person alive that doesn't face challenges: triumphs, highs, lows. We're not all that different, and everyone is going down this path to the end. ...Our job is just to be kind and to love."



"OUR JOB IS JUST
TO BE KIND AND
TO LOVE."

FINDING HOME IN MUSIC

SURVIVING, SINGING, & STARTING OVER

How the Peterborough Singers helped a promising young musician survive the unthinkable.

EDITOR'S NOTE *Over the years, Syd and the Peterborough Singers have quietly helped numerous young people, many of them in distressed situations, land on their feet and pursue their musical dreams. This is the true story of one such young person.*

It was a cold midnight in January, 2007. Seventeen-year-old Melody Thomas stood on the sidewalk outside of what had been, until that moment, her most recent home. All that she had was a single suitcase, which she had hastily packed with a random assortment of clothes.

She stood, heartbroken, in the dark. Where was she supposed to go? After some panicked messages, she had managed to get ahold of a friend who was able to put her up for the night. That took care of one night. But what about the rest?

Everything in Melody's life was falling to pieces. Her family had just fractured, spectacularly. She had no money. No home. But Melody did have one lifeline left: music.

Somehow, amid an extremely turbulent childhood, Melody had discovered a passion for singing. For the past few years, she had sung in a few choirs, including at her school, PCVS. In the dark of that January midnight, Melody remembered how, somehow, she was supposed to attend her very first rehearsal with The Peterborough Singers the following night.

A few months prior, Melody's school choir director collaborated with Syd Birrell to have her high school students prepare for and sing in the Singers' annual *Messiah* concert. Melody had long aspired to join the Peterborough Singers, but had not worked up the courage to audition, assuming that as a teenager she wasn't up to their standards.

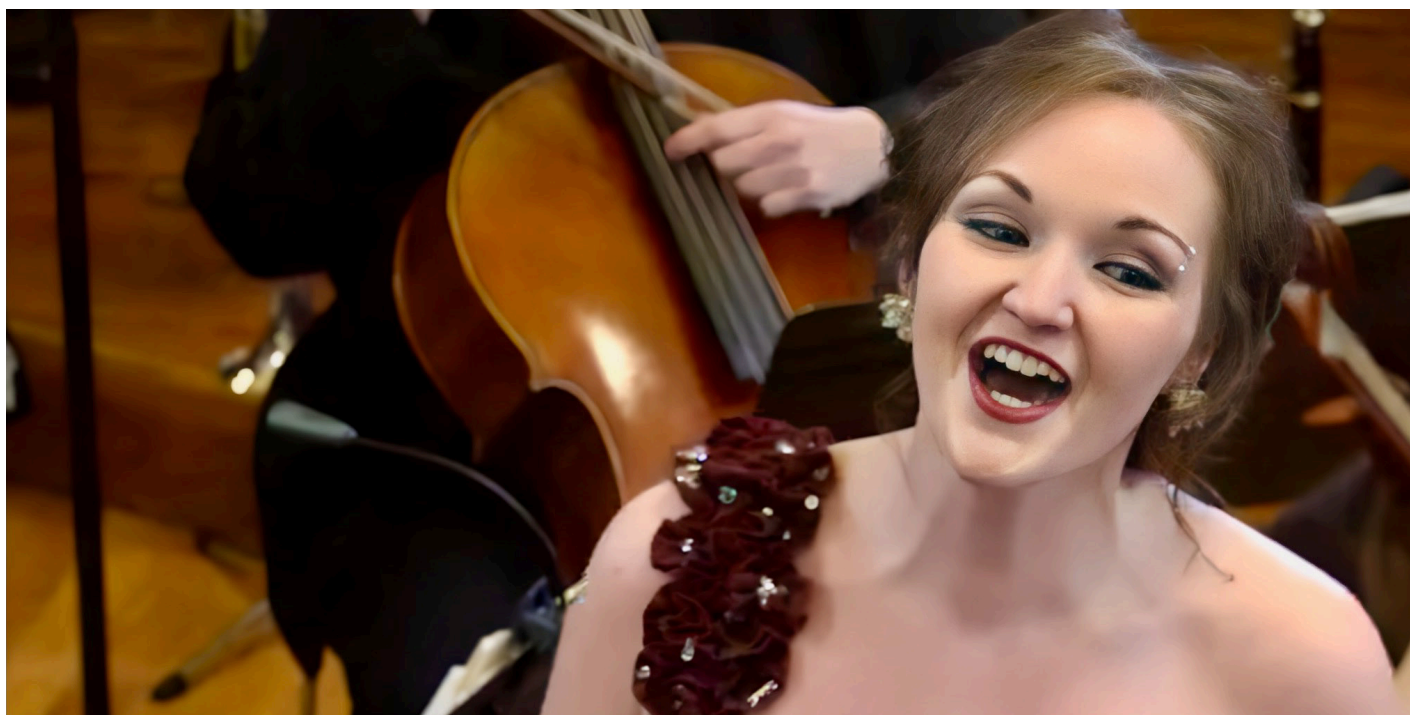
That had changed a few weeks earlier, in December. Melody had been taking singing lessons with Pam Birrell, paying for the lessons with money she earned working part-time jobs. Syd happened to come into the room during one lesson. "Wow, you've really got something here!" Melody remembers Syd exclaiming after hearing her sing. That unexpected compliment gave her the courage to ask to audition.

So she did. Right then and there. And she passed. Now, the night after being kicked out of her home, she was supposed to attend her first rehearsal. But even with her life falling apart, Melody resolved to go.

That's when everything changed. Syd soon learned about Melody's plight. And, as Melody puts it, he informed members of the choir in "a very sensitive and tactful way that there was a young person in their midst who was in real need of help." The response was overwhelming. In a single evening, recounts Melody, "I went from having no parents to having about 100 parents."

For a few months, Melody bounced around the houses of different friends, while members of the choir tried to find her an apartment. When they did find her a place, "Choir members I didn't even know showed up at my door with kitchenware and tools. Boxes and boxes of anything that they thought would be helpful."

Things were still very hard, however. Melody was in grade 12. Her dream was to go to school for music. The only catch? Applying to vocal programs required travelling to and from the universities for auditions. But Melody had no money, no car, and no place to stay when she got there.



Melody asked Syd if he had any suggestions, and Syd suggested Melody contact Joyce Barrett, a long-time member of the choir. Melody called Joyce, having no idea what to expect. She laughs when she recounts what happened next. “Joyce said, ‘I hate driving, but do you drive? Yes? Oh, why don’t you just take my car!’”

“I was barely 18 at that point,” Melody says. “I said ‘That’s crazy talk!’” But Joyce drove to where Melody was staying that very afternoon, dropped off her car and keys, and walked back home. In the coming weeks, Melody drove Joyce’s car to auditions around the province. Eventually, she learned that she had gotten into the University of Toronto’s vocal music program...with a full scholarship. “Nobody gets into U of T with a full ride!” she remembers Pam exclaiming when she heard the news.

But there was still a problem. While Melody attended U of T, she stayed in one of the school residences. However, during holidays when the residences closed, she had nowhere to stay. When Joyce learned of this, she offered Melody to stay with her and her husband, in their spare bedroom.

“I remember feeling kind of resistant to that,” recalls Melody. “I was wary. I had never had people around me who were unconditionally supportive. Initially I thought, ‘What’s the catch? You cannot continuously, unconditionally support me. What’s wrong with you?’” But, as she learned over time, there was no catch. She finally unpacked her suitcases permanently, and the Barrett-Hambley house became home and family to Melody for the next few years.

After graduating from U of T, Melody went on for one further year of studies at Wilfrid Laurier to pursue her Opera Diploma. Following that, she moved back to Peterborough, where she started teaching music. In short order, she had a waiting list. Eventually that waiting list became so long that she hired a second teacher. Melody has since hired a third teacher, specializing in guitar.

Melody is no longer a member of the Peterborough Singers. As a business owner and homeowner, she just doesn’t have the time she used to. Yet she says to this day, members of the choir will drop everything to come help her when she’s in need: when, for instance, something in her home needs repairing, and she doesn’t know how to do it.

Now Melody says she is grateful to be in a position to give back to the community. “I spent many years having very little to give because of my circumstances.” But now, “I’ve created employment in the arts for two other people. After being supported by the community that Syd created...I can be at the beacon of a different ship for another community of people.”

The Music Must Go On

ANNOUNCING THE SYD BIRRELL LEGACY FUND

Buckle up, Peterborough. This fall, The Peterborough Singers is launching the most ambitious fundraising campaign in its history.

The choir and concert-goers alike know that there is only one Syd Birrell. But Syd, more than anybody, knows that with or without him, *the music must go on*.

That's why, Syd says, he is retiring now, when the Singers can boast its largest membership of choristers ever, and is consistently delivering some of the best performances of its 35-year history, to packed houses. Now, when the choir is healthiest, is the time to pass on the leadership of the choir to a new, younger director.

To smooth that transition, and to ensure the long-term stability of the choir, the Singers has created the Syd Birrell Legacy Fund.

As Syd puts it, this fund is “not a monument, but a toolkit.” He explains, “It will help with the things that make the choir soar: world-class soloists who lift the roof, programs that bring music into communities, support for emerging Canadian artists, and all the invisible gears that keep the machine running. It's about ensuring the next conductor walks into a room full of possibility.”

No arts group survives entirely off ticket sales. For years, Syd and Peg McCracken have cultivated relationships with arts-supporting philanthropists and businesses, who have helped keep the Singers afloat and thriving with generous donations and sponsorships.

However, Syd says, now is the time to think bigger, and longer term. Every year, as budget allows, a certain amount will be moved from the fund into long-term investments. The goal is to create a robust endowment fund.

The success of this year's campaign for Syd's Legacy Fund will help ensure that The Peterborough Singers is still here, thriving, 35 years from now! Stay tuned for more details about the campaign for Syd's Legacy Fund.



SYD BIRRELL LEGACY FUND

HOW TO GIVE



Credit—Clifford Skarstedt



CREDIT CARD

One-time and recurring donations can be made via credit card online at:
www.peterboroughsingers.com/legacyfund

CHEQUE

Cheques should be made payable to *The Peterborough Singers* and sent to 211-171A Rink St. Peterborough, Ontario K9J 2J6. Write "*Syd Birrell Legacy Fund*" in memo.

E-TRANSFER

Send to singers@peterboroughsingers.com



LEAVE THE LEGACY OF MUSIC

Consider including The Peterborough Singers in your will. Contact our office or our partner for more details:

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