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Threshold Choir: Voices of Angels

By Diane Claytor



Diablo Valley Choir members Photo Diane Claytor

people facing death.

Fisher says that being a member of the choir "makes me happy to be alive." She joined the group 14 years ago when, with her children gone and her father dying, she was "suffering spiritually, facing losses that are a natural part of life," she explains. "I find that singing with the choir takes me to a place where I know all is well. That's part of the gift we give to the people we sing to ... we convey the message that all is well."

Fisher belongs to the all-women Diablo Valley Choir. Typically two to four women will sing a cappella to a patient. "I love the sisterhood and intimacy of blending my voice with other women," Fisher says. "There is something quite precious knowing that we are giving this gift to people who are experiencing this transition." She described instances of singing to someone who appears to be non-responsive. "When we choose our songs well and sing one with very few words, almost like a chant, we'll often see a shift in breathing, we'll see little bits of motion in the muscles around the mouth; it's very clear that we are being heard.

"We once sang for a woman who had been in Sweet Adelines for 50 years," Fisher continues. "She couldn't speak but she was soon directing us with her hands. I'm so moved by that type of experience, by knowing that what we're giving is a gift that is being received."

The 30-member Diablo Valley Choir is invited to sing at hospitals, hospice, nursing facilities and home bedsides, as well as at Services of Remembrance. There are few requirements for choir singers, according to Fisher, and they're always looking for new members. "They should be able to carry a tune, gently blend with other voices and be drawn to the work." There is an orientation period where members learn not only the music but how it feels to be at a bedside with someone at the end of life. Rehearsals are generally twice a month and help singers practice blending voices and become totally familiar with the songs, many of which are written by choir members. Songs range from those that are about celebrating life, about resting, about breathing easily and about letting go. "It is so not about performance," Fisher states. "It's really about connection and love. We are giving an individual gift to each recipient."

Fisher, a retired psychotherapist, says the choir has been such a treasured part of her "older woman years." She has been thinking a lot about what's important in her life right now and concludes that it's "intimacy, community and purpose. Finding all three in one place in this culture

Whether or not you believe angels exist, one thing is clear after meeting Orinda's Leah Fisher. She's as close to an angel on earth as one could be. The soft spoken, soon-to-be first-time grandmother has a hearty laugh and a warm, generous spirit. Fisher has two great passions in her life: her family and the Threshold Choir, which, according to their website, "brings ease and comfort to those at the threshold of living and dying ...with gentle voices and sincere kindness." Fisher says that "this is one of the most meaningful things I do."

The Threshold Choir was founded in 2000 by Marin County resident, Kate Munger, who, while sitting with a dying friend, began singing to him as a way of managing her own fear. She quickly discovered the music appeared to comfort both of them. Today there are more than 100 Threshold Choir chapters throughout the country, offering calming music with compassion and sensitivity to

with its warp speed is not an easy thing to do. And I get all three from this choir."

For additional information on the Diablo Valley Choir, please email diablovalley@thresholdchoir.org.

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