

A Gift of Song

Alina Larson

Kate Munger's childhood had the loveliest soundtrack: her mother's singing. Every night her mom would make her way down the hall, stopping to sing a different lullaby to each of her five children. Kate continued the family vocal tradition, joining school and community choirs, and eventually leading them.

One day in 1990 she sat at the bedside of a friend dying of AIDS, resting after a morning doing chores around his house. She began to sing and ended up repeating the same song for hours. "At the end of the afternoon I felt something really extraordinary had happened," says Kate. "I felt I'd given him a piece of me, a gift of my being. From then on I knew singing at bedsides was something I wanted to do, and that I needed to share."

Kate recruited 15 members for her Threshold Choir from choirs she'd been leading in the Bay Area. This month they celebrate eight years of bringing peace to ailing people. Kate is also celebrating the growth of her idea: There are now 52 such choirs across the nation.

But isn't it just too depressing? Not for Kate, or other members who often find the choir after singing at a dying parent's bedside. "Singing affects my cells first before it ever leaves my body," says Kate. "So many of us go by the martyrdom notion of service. I think that's rusty. You share what's been given, and give it generously. I love redefining service as something that also serves me."

She also loves "nourishing creativity among the other women." Many of the 300 songs in the choir's repertoire were composed by members—often, the first they'd ever written. "Someone will sit vigil and will write a song to hold that person in their hearts," Kate explains.

And the reaction? Listeners become relaxed, content, serene. "One woman, with her last words, mouthed the word 'Wonderful,'" says Kate, who in 2004 stepped up to another threshold: singing each Friday with a choir of incarcerated women. "Sometimes they're shy to start," Kate says, "but then they don't want to stop."

That description fits her too. Leading choirs is a more than full-time job for her now, and Kate savors every minute. "It's so wonderful to have a sense of purpose. I always say it's like I'm holding onto the tail of a big, happy dog. He's wagging away, and I'm just along for the ride."

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