



Grand Rapids Voice Collective: A New Model for Collaborative Multi-Teacher Studios

NATS members Elizabeth Barry and Corie Auger began collaborating as teachers in 2018 before officially founding [Grand Rapids Voice Collective](#) in 2020. They had a vision to create “an inclusive vocal community for singers where their voices are always heard and encouraged.” By combining their skill sets Auger and Barry created something together greater than they ever imagined as individuals.

Inter Nos: How did you meet, and how did you come up with the idea of creating a collaborative multi-teacher voice studio?

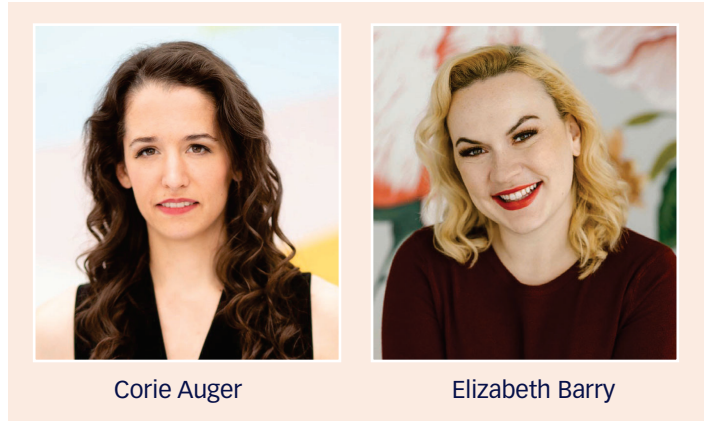
EB: Corie and I met as students in undergrad at Grand Valley State University between 2009 and 2012. After grad school, in 2015, we both returned to West Michigan to begin our careers. GRVC truly started at Corie’s apartment kitchen table, where she’d invite me over for breakfast to talk about teaching, pedagogy, performing and so much more. At the time, we were working for two different companies, and it would have been really easy to see one another as ‘competition.’ Instead, Corie and I developed a relationship where we could both come to one another for sound advice and support.

Then in 2018, I started renting the open studio space where Corie was teaching.

Eventually we ran both of our independent studios under a DBA (doing business as) “Grand Rapids Voice Collective.” Our collaborative teaching together started off as us chatting between lessons about our singers, sharing rep ideas, and then we decided to do some recitals together, and then a workshop the next summer. By the fall of 2019, we were contemplating bringing on at least one additional teacher to accommodate the waiting list we were developing. We decided it was time to invest some money to develop our brand and really set up our business for success. We headed into 2020 with our application to form an LLC so we could bring on new teachers and continue expanding.

We signed our paperwork and opened our bank account the Tuesday after the State of Michigan shut down — March 17, 2020.

We are now a team of four voice teachers. Corie and I are constantly pinching ourselves that we get to work with such incredible educators, musicians, and people. Our two associate teachers (Emily Mills and Hannah DeBoer) are curious, kind, fun people, and their students are making huge strides toward



their goals. We love their attention to detail and the care they have for each of their singers. The best part of our team is that we don’t even know what it’s going to be like when we can be back in the studios! I can’t wait to get in that groove and really see what innovative things we can discover. The shenanigans are going to be TikTok worthy for sure.

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Inter Nos: What made you decide to focus on middle school/high school students with an emphasis on musical theatre?

EB: Grand Rapids loves musical theatre. We have almost a dozen amateur theatre companies in town that are performing regularly (pre-COVID). If we look outside GR, we have a few summer stocks and even an equity house about 45 minutes away from us. We’ve seen a number of Broadway performers move back to the region and expect things to continue to develop in 2021 and beyond. Not to mention the robust high school performing arts in our region. Because of that, nearly all of the folk we serve are hoping to get involved in the musical theatre community in West Michigan. Many of the singers we work with aim to audition for top-tier musical theatre programs with their eyes on Broadway. The cool thing about specializing in musical theatre is that it

encompasses nearly every genre of vocal music. Each of our teachers has a different area of expertise within the musical theatre umbrella and is continually expanding their repertoire and skills to keep up with the needs of our community.

Inter Nos: Are parents very involved in the lessons or do you primarily communicate directly with the students?

EB: We miss the parent interaction we'd have at the studio! We'd go from having five-minute chats between lessons at the studio, to maybe seeing them for a moment in the background of the Zoom call. In general, as our singers get older too, we see less of the parents. Singers start to drive themselves to their activities, and we'll only see parents at big events. We've stepped up our email communication and are offering more studio events in an effort to keep the parents more informed about what we're up to. We definitely will continue this as COVID thaws and we get back to the studio.

"We've also been building a collaborative space for teachers only — a place where we nerdy pedagogues can gather, talk about teaching techniques, learn new skills, and just be together! Sometimes teaching 1:1 can feel very isolating by the end of the week, so we're excited to be able to serve the community in this new way this year."

"Our combined knowledge and expertise means that you get an incredibly well rounded vocal education focused on developing all of the skills you need (not just your singing voice) to be successful in this industry." — grandrapidsvoicecollective.com

Inter Nos: Can you explain this quote from your website? How do you work collaboratively with students to share your combined expertise? What do you offer your students in addition to individual singing lessons?

CA and EB: Prior to COVID, working collaboratively meant hollering across the lobby and saying, "Can you come listen to this singer for a second?" What's been happening a lot more recently is we will send singers to take a one-off lesson



Grand Rapids Voice Collective student Lucie Troyer is a junior at Grandville High School

with another GRVC teacher. We love that they get to see another style of teaching and hear things in new ways. Because at the end of the day, we don't care who helps a singer understand a concept or take steps forward. We care that they are supported and making progress toward their goals.

One of the ways we've promoted collaboration in the studio is with our weekly group class for developing performance skills. It's called "Green Room," and each week, we meet virtually so we can implement the things singers learn in 1:1 lessons in "performance mode."

We also have monthly studio events that are included with every singer's membership fee. Each month we have a different event or topic ranging from Karaoke Night, Q&A with a Broadway Performer, Member Sessions with a GRVC teacher, or Master Classes with a GRVC teacher or guest artist. Our member sessions cover things like vocal health, how to learn music, and business basics for singers. Our goal is to share as much useful information with our members as possible because so many of them want to do this for a career.

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We actually love that COVID made all of these events happen online. It's shown us how to really connect with our singing community and add value to their training. Our physical location is small, and online we've been able to have large groups assemble. An added bonus is that our singers have been way more engaged because of breakout rooms and technology than we'd be able to have in-person at the studio.

Inter Nos: Do you still have a brick-and-mortar studio building? Pre-COVID were all of your lessons in-person? How are you currently delivering lessons? What will your studio look like next fall?

EB: GRVC has been entirely online since March of 2020. We do have a physical studio about 15 minutes away from downtown

Grand Rapids is a pretty bustling part of town. In Kent County where we live, already 18 percent of our population is fully immunized, and we are eager to return to in person lessons. We know that we've lost a portion of our business because we opted to stay online until our teaching staff is fully immunized.

We are beginning to consider what returning to our studio will look like. We've spoken with some dance studio owners about their safety protocols and will likely be adopting several of their best practices as well as considering the Colorado Study on Aerosolized particles as we figure out how to safely resume in person teaching.

We think that in order to do so in the fall, we will have to expand to a larger office suite so all of our teachers will have their own dedicated studio. We have a large number of online singers who we've gained during COVID, so we're considering a hybrid model where we alternate an in-person singer with a Zoom singer so that we can have an hour of air scrubbing and cleaning between sessions. We still have many questions about what we will need to do and consider in order to safely resume and will not make any hasty decisions.

Inter Nos: How do you balance your active performing (pre-COVID) with your teaching?

CA: It's always a work in-progress, but when one of us has a large upcoming performance or is gone for a few weeks on a gig, our other teachers step in to sub their lessons. This is part of the wonderful thing about having such a collaborative team! The hardest part is making sure we, the teachers, have enough headspace to get ourselves into "performance mode," because our energies are so often strongly focused on the successes of our singers.)

Inter Nos: How important is it that your students get to see you as performers in the community?

EB: We think it's incredibly important for our singers to see us doing the things we love in this world. Whether that's performing, crafting, community advocacy, or something else. Showing our singers that we are multifaceted people with unique interests and talents is part of the joy of being



Grand Rapids Voice Collective has been entirely online since March of 2020. A sign in their waiting room reads, "Your Voice Will Always Be Heard."

educators. We want to ensure that the next generation of singers knows that they get to bring all of the things that make them unique on their journey. And each of those facets is important, worth cultivating, and will ultimately contribute to their success.

Inter Nos: How important is social media to your studio: FB, Instagram, TikTok, etc.?

EB: Medium. We post consistently on Instagram, FB, Twitter, and LinkedIn, and we have a small following on each platform. Where we are noticing the most traction is from our teachers who have profiles on TikTok. Four out of the last 10 inquiries have come from folks who found one of our teachers on TikTok. Currently, GRVC does not have a business TikTok account, and that may change when we are able to go back to in-person teaching. Our best referral source remains word of mouth from current clients (some of whom did find us on social media).

Inter Nos: What are some of the benefits of your collaborative studio? What are some of the challenges?

CA: We really have an amazing team of teachers. Each of us has our own little niche within the teaching world. Collaborating with each other keeps us open and curious as teachers, and gives our singers such a beautiful, wide perspective. It shows our singers that there's not just one way to approach singing and gives them permission to take more ownership of their journey. Our biggest challenges are often back-office, human-error issues, like

scheduling mistakes (our calendars get kind of hectic!) or having technical issues with Zoom. Honestly, I think this is due in part to the fact that our team is so focused on cultivating this culture of collaboration and open communication. We really don't have to tiptoe around anyone's ego.

"This work is such a great reminder that we're all on the same team. Art is not a competition . . ."

Inter Nos: If you had a time machine, what would you tell your 14-year-old singer self?

EB: "Elizabeth, you're gonna do incredible things that will absolutely surprise, thrill, and scare you. Keep going, keep dreaming, and keep being true to yourself."

CA: "Corie, keep being curious, keep exploring! It's going to take you some awesome places. Also you're going to want to start drinking coffee as an adult — do not do this. It is a trap."


Inter Nos: Is there anything else you'd like to add about GRVC?

CA: We're really grateful to be able to work with such wonderful humans: teachers, singers, and community members alike. This work is such a great reminder that we're all on the same team. Art is not a competition, even though it may feel competitive at times.

Elizabeth Barry (she/her) is a singer, educator, leader, and creative based in Grand Rapids, Michigan. She is co-founder of Grand Rapids Voice Collective, a collaborative, multi-teacher voice studio. In addition to her work with GRVC, Elizabeth is an adjudicator for the Sutton Foster Awards, which sends two talented performers from Michigan to the Jimmy Awards in NYC. When she is not teaching, Elizabeth serves the creative community in West Michigan as a member of the Creative Chambers Council through the Grand Rapids Chamber of Commerce. Elizabeth is also a board member for the Michigan NATS Chapter. In 2016, she was selected as one of the Joan Frey Boytim Award recipients for Independent NATS Teachers. Elizabeth is a proud member of the SpeakEasy Cooperative.

Corie Auger (she/her) is an active performer and educator. Her teaching combines voice science, exercise physiology, and sports psychology to enable singers to build their most efficient, expressive instrument. Corie is a co-founder of Grand Rapids Voice Collective, an inclusive multi-teacher voice studio. In addition, she currently serves on the faculty at Western Michigan University School of Theater and the Grand Valley State University School of Music, Theater, & Dance. Corie also serves as the secretary of the Michigan NATS Chapter.

Are you thinking about adding teachers to your independent studio?



Reasons why?

- Increased income and/or financial freedom
- Desire to help a greater number of students
- Wish to meet a community/artistic need
- Personal sense of accomplishment and growth
- You want a clone/apprentice
- Other?

Temperament

- Ability to handle stress well
- Understanding that this requires business skills in addition to artistic and academic skills
- Ability to look at the "big picture" rather than just personalization
- Comfort with working long hours and being "the boss"

Current studio

- Is your current studio successful and well-run?
- Do you have good policies, procedures and accounting systems already in place?

New students?

- Do you have a waiting list to jump-start your new student population?
- Do you already have a marketing network for referrals?
- What will new teacher(s) bring that you don't currently offer?

**Ready?
BEGIN!**

Before you start CONSIDER

Financial readiness

- Evaluating your current situation:
- Stable, comfortable, could afford to invest some money in expansion
 - Risky, not much liquidity or investment capital available
 - Excellent shape; good loan risk

Financial risk

- Evaluating your comfort level with financial risk
- Do you have money available to invest in expansion?
 - Are you comfortable seeking a loan to expand?
 - Do you prefer to start very slowly without a large monetary outlay?

Time

- Do you have enough available time to manage expansion along with your current teaching load?
- Be careful—don't underestimate the amount of time increase it will take to expand
 - Delegate! Especially in areas that are not your strength
 - Consider hiring outside help or online resources in areas like web design, book keeping, studio management software

Teachers?

- One or many?
- Voice and/or instrumental?
- Apprentices, Associates, Other?
- Remote or in-studio?