

Carrying Joan's Song Forward

By Brandon Marcus

As my flight lifted off from San Antonio following the 59th NATS National Conference, I found myself looking out the airplane window longer than usual. The excitement of an incredible week was beginning to settle into reflection. My suitcase was filled with conference notes, new teaching ideas, and a few books. My phone held dozens of new contacts and countless photos. But what occupied my thoughts most wasn't a lecture, a performance, or even a particular conversation.

It was a person.

Joan Frey Boytim.

This year's conference carried a different feeling, knowing that Joan was no longer with us. Her absence was deeply felt throughout the week, yet, in many ways, her presence seemed stronger than ever. As I reflected on my own experience as a 2022 Joan Frey Boytim Fellow, I realized that her influence continues to echo through every new recipient who walks through the conference doors because of her extraordinary generosity and unwavering commitment to independent voice teachers.

I remember what it meant to receive the fellowship in 2022. Like many independent teachers, professional development is both essential and expensive. Unlike many colleagues in higher education, independent teachers often do not have institutional funding to support conference attendance. Every registration fee, hotel reservation, and airline ticket comes directly from our own pockets. The Joan Frey Boytim Fellowship changes that reality. It opens doors that might otherwise remain closed and allows independent teachers to learn, connect, and grow alongside some of the finest educators in our profession.

That opportunity changed me.

The conference expanded my understanding of voice science, pedagogy, artistry, and business. It challenged my assumptions and introduced me to colleagues who have since become mentors, collaborators, and friends. It reminded me that independent teachers are not isolated professionals working alone in our studios. We are part of something much larger, a community committed to excellence in teaching and lifelong learning.



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Returning to the conference this year, I had the privilege of watching a new class of Joan Frey Boytim Fellows experience many of those same moments for the very first time. I watched them eagerly fill notebooks during sessions, introduce themselves to leaders they had only read about, and engage in conversations that will undoubtedly shape their careers for years to come. As I watched them, I couldn't help but smile.

I recognized that excitement because I had once been in their shoes.

The fellowship is much more than financial assistance. It is an invitation into the larger NATS community. It is a statement that independent teachers matter. It is an investment in educators who, in turn, will invest in thousands of singers throughout their careers.

That is Joan's legacy.

One of the most remarkable aspects of the fellowship is the way it continues to sustain itself. Joan did not simply establish an award and hope it would continue. Instead, she created a lasting model of generosity through her life's work. The fellowship is funded through royalties from her publications, including the beloved "The First Book of Soprano Solos," "The First Book of Mezzo-Soprano/Alto Solos," "The First Book of Tenor Solos," "The First Book of Baritone/Bass Solos," "The First Book of Broadway Solos," and the many companion volumes, collections, and recordings that have become staples in voice studios around the world.

If you've taught singers for any length of time, chances are you've reached for one of Joan's books countless times. We introduce beginning students to classical literature through them. We prepare auditions with them. We assign repertoire from them every semester. They sit on our studio shelves, worn from years of use and filled with penciled markings and dog-eared pages.

For many of us, these books were simply trusted teaching resources.

Now I find myself seeing them differently.

Every time one of those books is purchased, another independent teacher moves one step closer to attending a future NATS National Conference. Every royalty generated

helps provide an opportunity for someone to learn, grow, and return home a better teacher than when they arrived.

What an extraordinary legacy.

Joan's influence extends far beyond the repertoire she thoughtfully curated. She invested in people she would never meet. She believed in future generations of teachers she would never teach personally. Through remarkable foresight, she transformed decades of scholarship and publishing into a perpetual investment in our profession.

As I reflected on this during my flight home, I realized that this is perhaps the most beautiful definition of legacy: creating opportunities that continue long after you're gone. This year's fellows are evidence that her vision is still alive.

Years from now, they will likely mentor young teachers, present conference sessions, serve in NATS leadership, publish research, adjudicate auditions, and inspire countless singers. The ripple effect has already begun.

And those ripples continue because Joan chose generosity.

As independent teachers, we often spend our days pouring into others. We encourage students through difficult auditions, celebrate breakthroughs, navigate vocal challenges, and witness incredible artistic growth. We devote ourselves to helping singers find their voices. Professional development allows us to continue finding our own.

Attending the NATS conference reminds us why we entered this profession in the first place. It renews our curiosity. It strengthens our teaching. It reconnects us with colleagues who understand both the joys and challenges of independent studio life.

That is exactly why the Joan Frey Boytim Fellowship remains so important.

If you are an independent teacher who has considered attending the NATS National Conference but wondered whether it was financially possible, I hope you'll consider applying. Don't assume someone else is more deserving. Don't convince yourself that you'll apply "next time." Joan created this opportunity for teachers like you.

Take advantage of it.

If you are selected, arrive with an open notebook and an open mind. Attend sessions outside your comfort zone. Introduce yourself to someone you've admired from afar. Ask questions. Share ideas. Build relationships. You'll leave with far more than handouts and conference materials.

You'll leave transformed.

If you've already received the fellowship, consider how you can continue Joan's legacy in your own community. Mentor a younger teacher. Share what you've learned. Volunteer your time. Present a session. Serve your chapter or region. Encourage another independent teacher to apply.

Legacy grows when it is shared.

As my plane descended toward home, I realized that while conferences eventually end, their impact never truly does. We return to our studios carrying fresh ideas, renewed purpose, and deeper connections. Our students benefit from everything we've learned, even though they may never know where those ideas originated.



Joan Frey Boytim may no longer be with us, but her song continues.

Many of those ideas exist because one remarkable teacher believed independent voice teachers deserved every opportunity to thrive.

Joan Frey Boytim may no longer be with us, but her song continues.

It continues in every well-loved repertoire collection sitting on our piano benches.

It continues in every fellowship recipient taking their first steps into a national conference.

It continues in every independent teacher who returns home inspired to serve students with renewed excellence.

And it continues every time one of us chooses to invest in another teacher, just as Joan invested in us.

As I unpacked my suitcase after returning home, I placed my conference materials on the shelf beside several familiar

books whose spines have become faded from years of use. I smiled as I noticed whose name appeared on each cover.

Those books had already shaped my students.

Now I know they helped shape me, too.

Thank you, Joan, for believing in independent teachers, for believing in the future of our profession, and for creating a legacy that continues to lift others long after your own voice has fallen silent.

May we honor that legacy by continuing the work, supporting one another, and encouraging every eligible independent teacher to apply for the Joan Frey Boytim Fellowship. It is more than an award.

It is an invitation to become part of a legacy that is still being written.

Brandon Marcus (he/him) is the owner and director of The

Studio in Daphne, Alabama, where he has spent the past decade helping young artists build confidence, develop technical excellence, and discover their unique voices through music, theatre, and performance.

Brandon serves as audition coordinator for the Alabama Chapter of NATS and is a member of the NATS Southeastern Region Executive Board. He is also the founder and executive director of Arts Access Alabama, a nonprofit organization committed to removing financial barriers to arts education through scholarships, educational programs, and community partnerships.

His leadership and service have earned him recognition as a 2026 NATS Emerging Leader Award recipient, a 2022 Joan Frey Boytim Fellow, and a recipient of the 2024 President's Volunteer Service Lifetime Achievement Award, presented by President Joe Biden.

Brandon earned degrees from Spring Hill College and the University of South Alabama. He is an MTNA Nationally Certified Teacher of Music in Voice, a PAVA Recognized Vocologist, and holds numerous certificates in vocal health, voice science, and youth vocal pedagogy.

Aspire to Inspire

The Life & Legacy of Joan Frey Boytim

Written by Craig Jurgensen

"She was, quite simply, a gift to NATS, to the voice profession, and to generations of singers and teachers."

"Joan emerges not only as an extraordinary teacher, but as a creative, generous, and deeply human presence whose life continues to inspire."



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