NATS for a Lifetime Showcase: Helen Ceci

I can hardly believe that I've been asked to write this NATS for a Lifetime article! It seems like just a few years ago I was graduating from Oberlin College Conservatory of Music – a young singer with so many possibilities ahead. Besides performing, I was already teaching singing to some young people in the town of Oberlin (with the approval of my major voice teacher, Howard Hatton). Howard told me about an organization called National Association of Teachers of Singing, to which he belonged, and he strongly encouraged me to join when I had been teaching privately for a while longer.

I taught for most of a year in Ohio, travelling from town to town, until I got married and moved to Milwaukee. I immediately interviewed to teach at the Wisconsin Conservatory of Music, and taught many students there for a few years before deciding to begin a home studio instead. Since that time I have continued to have a successful home studio, with many referrals from former students and colleagues in the singing world. Of course, I was also a very active singer on the Milwaukee scene for quite a number of years. Somewhere during that early teaching time (I can't remember when) I finally joined national NATS. Then some performance and teaching colleagues told me they were going to start a Wisconsin state chapter of NATS, and I joined that, too. In that early time I was so busy teaching and performing that I wasn't an avid participant in that group.



Helen Ceci

Later, I realized the great benefits of the chapter for me and my students, through competition opportunities, workshops and networking, and I got much more involved, finally serving in some offices including secretary for a thousand years, and president for two terms. I continue to be active in the chapter to this day, and I really appreciate all the wonderful singers and great teachers I know who are teaching in this state.

During all these years of teaching, (over 50) I have had to change my teaching styles a number of times to address the changing needs of my ambitious students. I still teach classical style, but in more recent years there has been a huge interest in music theater careers, and even more recently, contemporary commercial music has come roaring full-court press to my studio door. What to do? Well, I turned to my NATS resources. The combined wisdom of the many articles in *Journal of Singing*, attendance at many NATS sponsored workshops and conventions, and many conversations with my state NATS colleagues really helped to satisfy my curiosity regarding the teaching of healthful and artful singing in all of those styles. An evening in my studio goes from Handel to Jason Robert Brown to Rihanna.

To think that when I was in school all those years ago, "belting" was viewed with downright horror makes me smile a lot now! NATS master clinicians deal with almost any kind of sound a person would want to make with the human voice, and do it well. Vocal health issues were never really discussed back in my Oberlin days either, except "don't over-practice" and "don't belt," and "don't sing with laryngitis." Now, young teachers can read, attend master classes and lectures, or even intern with people who specialize in the care of the voice! I sometimes feel that I had to wade through so many of my early teaching years with the equivalent of a vocal miner's headlight to figure out the right things to do for myself and my students. Things are SO MUCH BETTER now.

I have such an immense appreciation for the dedication of the people who keep NATS going as an organization, both on the national and especially on the state level. Thanks to all my marvelous colleagues! What a wonderful resource for all of us private studio voice teachers! Thank you all so very much!