

Passion Project: The Rehart Gesner Fund

By Michelle Latour

As voice teachers and performers, planning recitals is a part of the gig. Whether it is for ourselves, our studio, or for undergraduate or graduate students in academia, it is something we all do. I love planning recitals — thinking about unique and unusual repertoire for students, balancing the program between genres, styles and musical considerations, and even staging musical theatre solos and duets. So, what about planning a benefit recital? What started as a casual idea to present a recital in an adult student's private home, quickly blossomed into a full-blown passion project.



Michelle Latour

About a year ago, Katy, one of my adult avocational students, and I were discussing recitals during her voice lesson. She mentioned that she loved throwing parties and had a beautiful home in which to host guests. She nonchalantly mentioned, "We should do a recital at my house, and we can ask some of your other adult students to participate." I responded, "Yes! That's a great idea!" Over the next few weeks we discussed details, and I contacted some of my adult students. Everyone was on board. A few weeks later, again in Katy's lesson, somehow, we came up with the idea of doing a benefit recital, mutually coming to the conclusion that we would raise scholarship money for private voice lessons for Las Vegas public school music teachers. We both agreed that younger students had several avenues for finding financial aid, so why not offer something novel and targeted to a part of the community that might welcome the financial support? And thus, the Rehart Gesner Fund was born.

What's With the Name?

Born from a place of inspiration, the Rehart Gesner Fund is named after our grandmothers, Ruth Rehart and Lorraine Gesner, both of whom had a profound impact on our musical upbringing. The cause is named after them and strives to "provide opportunities to nurture the artist within."

My grandmother, Ruth Rehart, was always present in encouraging me with my artistic endeavors, whether it be attending dance, flute, piano or voice recitals. Lorraine Gesner, Katy's grandmother, was her advocate in life and in music. She paid for piano and voice lessons and attended every performance. We wanted to honor the memory of our grandmothers by advocating for singers the way our

grandmothers championed for us. Offering assistance to those who want to grow and nurture their talent, when they otherwise might not be able to, became the heart of our cause.

Our mission was to raise money for scholarships for private voice lessons for public school music teachers, as we wanted to focus our energies on helping a part of the community that is over-worked and under-appreciated. Public school music teachers often do not have time for themselves, let alone finding time to carve out an hour each week for voice lessons. The Rehart Gesner Fund was an answer for this.

Steep Learning Curve

When we embarked upon this journey, Katy and I had no idea what we were doing or how it would turn out. What we did not anticipate was how much planning, organizing and effort it would take to make this a successful project. We have learned so much!



Above: Nicole Harris-Taylor sings. At right, left side: Latour's student and fund co-founder Katy Morris participates at the recital in her home; Right side: Cassandra Krupp performs.

Katy and I knew absolutely zero about how to livestream an event or how to fundraise, and we for sure did not know how to go about asking others for money. But Katy knew how to throw a great party, I knew how to program a beautiful and interesting recital, and we both had a multitude of motivation and desire to promote a worthy cause.

Katy and I spent countless hours figuring out what we needed to do and then divided tasks. We spent a plethora of time researching — comparing donation platforms, learning how to create, launch, price and manage a silent auction, and deciding which digital invitation medium to use.

We went through the branding process to create a logo, using my studio branding as a starting point, and then built a website and social media pages, created business cards, opened new email accounts, and established business phone numbers. Katy learned how to set up Givebutler (not to be confused with Givebetter), the online platform we decided to use, and she unintentionally discovered how much she loved using Canva to create social media posts. I took on the charge of learning how to run a silent auction.

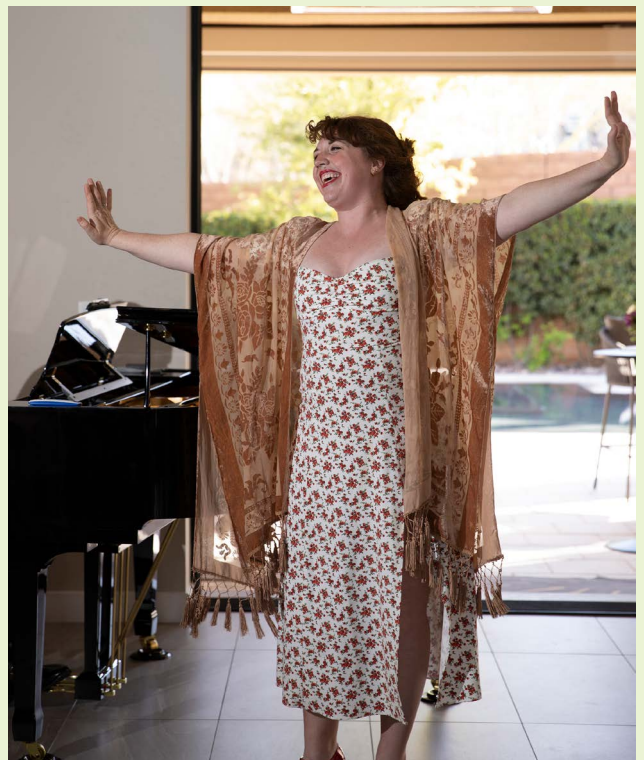
Other time-consuming undertakings included creating a detailed program with recital information, artist bios, and silent auction descriptions with QR codes for bidding. We learned how to add the scholarship application process on

our website via Jotform. We interviewed photographers and catering companies, and we had numerous banking appointments so that we could open bank accounts under Rehart Gesner.

Thankfully, we had an immense amount of help from family, friends and colleagues who shared our enthusiasm with our cause, whether it be building our website free of charge, writing our press release, donating beverages to the event, or consenting to be on the Board of Directors. The biggest perk was that Katy and I concurred on just about everything, even mutually agreeing to invest a fair amount of our own money for the first recital, and we had a lot of fun seeing our project come to fruition.

We curated silent auction items by starting with what we already owned. We both had some high dollar gift cards for spa treatments and local restaurants, Katy's husband donated an incredibly generous and unique experience, and I donated a three-pack of voice lessons in addition to contributing several bottles of wine from my personal collection. We also had some amazing friends and colleagues who donated items ranging from ukulele lessons to Italian diction coaching to laryngeal massage sessions.

Prior to the event we walked through "day-of" timing and set up tables, chairs and sound equipment. I had written a script





L to R: Cassandra Krupp, Shane Jensen, Stephanie Redman, Nicole Harris-Taylor, Katy Morris, Dr. Michelle Latour, Dina Emerson, Hye Youn Joo Sin.

with minute-by-minute timings for the event, and I developed detailed job descriptions for all our volunteers.

Success Story

When the day arrived for the event, Katy and I had no expectations regarding how things would unfold. We were so excited but were incredibly anxious to see if our efforts would come to fruition. Our original fundraising goal was \$5,000, and we raised more than \$35,000. The event was amazing and an overwhelming success!

The Inaugural Rehart Gesner Benefit Recital was attended by more than 65 guests while also being livestreamed via Givebutter. Other details included catering by a local company, an open bar, a detailed printed program, a silent auction that brought in over \$7,000, valet parking, unique parting gifts for all attendees, a professional photographer documenting the event, beautiful flower arrangements, and a recital featuring six of my adult voice students performing beloved musical theatre, classical and operatic songs, arias and duets.

The generous donations from the community have so far enabled us to extend assistance to seven teachers. We decided to offer scholarship packages valued at \$1,500, giving teachers 12 one-hour voice lessons, with the option to renew. Because my own studio was near capacity, I was able to hire two additional voice teachers to take on students, Dr. Kimberly James and Kimberly Kanitz. It has been incredibly rewarding to not only work with four award recipients but also to be able to hire two Las Vegas voice teachers whom I greatly admire as fellow colleagues and friends. We will open the application process again in February so that we can extend stipends to more music educators.

In working with these clients, it soon became glaringly obvious that there was a need for what we were offering. Many K-5 general music teachers in Las Vegas do not have extensive singing experience. Two of the educators I am currently

working with are instrumentalists and had not received much vocal training or education regarding how to care for their voices during their undergraduate degree programs. One of my clients was a vocal music education major in college and had not sung since the pandemic. It has been an absolute joy and honor in helping her rediscover her voice.

In weekly voice lessons, we have covered an array of topics ranging from learning basic vocal technique to ideas for classroom strategies to discussions about vocal health and hygiene. Many times, lessons were a place where singers could discover their own voices and were grateful to be able to take time just for themselves.

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An unexpected benefit of developing the Rehart Gesner Fund has been the collaboration with renowned laryngologist, Dr. Reena Gupta. Through Rehart Gesner funds, we have set up a day of voice screenings for all Rehart Gesner scholarship recipients. Many of these teachers experience extreme vocal fatigue due to daily vocal usage in the classroom, so it is an amazing opportunity for these educators to receive this service in order to learn what is actually going on with their voices.

What's Next?

After all the hard work Katy and I dedicated to the first recital, along with the amazing support from the community,

and the rewarding experience of providing voice lessons to music teachers, Katy and I knew that we would continue this work. The Second Annual Rehart Gesner Benefit Recital is scheduled for Sunday, April 14, 2024, with a fundraising goal of \$40,000.

Since we had laid the groundwork with the first event, we started planning much earlier and have more far-reaching goals. Our biggest goal for next year is to have more presence in the community. Although we are a unique and interesting cause, very few people in the community know we exist, and added to that is the difficulty of remembering our name.

We are aiming to appear on a local morning news show, to be featured in a Las Vegas magazine, and to be a guest on a local podcast. We also are hopeful that we can garner more silent auction items and receive more donations through reaching out to local businesses, restaurants and casinos, rather than using our own resources.

New for this year is the development of levels of corporate and individual sponsorship as well as launching the ability for a business or individual to name a memorial scholarship after a loved one with a three-year renewable commitment.

If we really allow ourselves to dream big, we have started thinking about making Rehart Gesner an official non-profit entity and even making Rehart Gesner a national organization so that we can offer voice lesson scholarships to teachers in other communities.

Katy and I developed the Rehart Gesner Fund with a desire to provide opportunities for Las Vegas public school music teachers so they could explore their own personal development. It has been such a pleasure and an honor to help fill that gap, giving deserved recognition and support to educators who would like to cultivate their own talent. We are excited to see what the next chapter holds for us!

To learn more about Rehart Gesner please follow us on Instagram [@rehartgesnerfund](#), Facebook at [Rehart Gesner Fund](#), or visit [rehartgesnerartists.com](#).

*With more than 32 years of teaching experience, **Dr. Michelle Latour** currently owns the LATOUR voice studios, LLC. Latour is a founding member and former Co-Managing Diva for Opera-On-Tap, Las Vegas, and most recently joined forces with several other Las Vegas voice teachers to form the Vegas Voice Teachers Cooperative™. Prior to becoming an independent studio owner, Latour served on the voice faculties at the University of Nevada Las Vegas, Bluffton University, San Diego State University, the University of San Diego, and the International Opera Performance Experience in Italy. Latour received her*



Feeling Philanthropic?

This "Passion Project" is a wonderful testament to the impact individuals can have on the lives of others. It's exciting to see people stepping up to make a difference, and you might find yourself feeling inspired to create your own charitable vocal arts project.

You don't have to start from scratch. NATS offers a wealth of resources to help you channel your philanthropic spirit within the framework of the organization, enabling you to create scholarships and programming for members and their students. These resources include:

- Professional consultation on fundraising strategies and tactics including hosting events
- Assistance in creating fundraising collateral materials and web content
- Creation and maintenance of online fundraising forms to facilitate donations
- Handling of tax receipting and thank-you emails to donors
- Financial management and investment services

There are currently 50 chapter, region, and private studio scholarship funds under the NATS Endowment umbrella, and they all could use your volunteer support. There are also volunteer opportunities to support national NATS projects that support professional development, student access to voice education, composers creating new music, NATSAA, NMTC, and NSA.

Alternatively, you can show your support for one of the many philanthropic projects already established by joining the [NATS Circle of Friends](#). When you make a tax-deductible contribution, you can directly support your favorite chapter, scholarship fund, or NATS program.

doctorate from the University of Southern California, where she was a graduate assistant in the vocal arts department and a scholarship recipient. Her students have gone on to win prestigious awards, to perform professionally in a variety of genres, and to become voice teachers with thriving private studios or serving in academia. She is also incredibly proud of her students who take voice lessons just because they love it — they love the journey, they love discovering their potential, and they just love to sing! To learn more, visit [drmichellelatour.com](#).