

Speaking Independently ... with President Diana Allan

Since independent teachers make up over half of our membership, I was delighted when Cynthia Vaughn, Independent Voice associate editor, reached out to me to answer some questions about what plans NATS has for independents. Not many members know that I began my career as an independent voice teacher and continue to teach private students. I always have found it challenging, inspiring, and rewarding to work with singers of all ages on a variety of repertoire styles. Teaching singing, whether as an independent teacher or in the university setting, enables us to live out our passion, one student at a time.



This has increased access to professional development opportunities for teachers and increased access to our students who participate in chapter student auditions and the National Student Auditions.

Something that warmed my heart through 2020 and 2021 is how NATS members throughout our association raised funds for NATS membership renewals to assist many of our colleagues who were financially affected by the pandemic. Financial hardships may continue to affect some of our members. If you find yourself in this circumstance, please don't hesitate to reach out to your chapter or region

leaders. We want to continue to help when and where we can.

1. How has NATS served independent voice teachers in recent years, especially since 2020?

Little did we know when we gathered in NYC for the 2020 Winter Workshop, "The Complete Singer," that three months later we would be completely locked down by COVID-19. That spring, NATS was in the process of finalizing plans for our 2020 national conference to be held in Knoxville, Tennessee, in June. Under the deft leadership of then President Karen Brunssen and Executive Director Allen Henderson, we pivoted and *retooled* our conference to be offered virtually. More than 2,400 NATS members gathered online to attend this conference — the largest number we have ever enjoyed! So many independent teachers were featured in both premium workshops and breakout sessions. Many of our new members and conference attendees were independent teachers whose feedback was overwhelmingly positive. Through a most difficult time, we were able to provide access to our members who were reeling from the unexpected shutdown.

In addition to producing webinars providing COVID-19 resources for singers and music educators, we began a social media campaign to educate ourselves on a new reality for many of us — teaching online. (Many independent teachers had been doing this for years.) The NATS social media pages shared ways to provide instruction and accompaniment in real time along with recommendations on equipment and software that would help us all do our best, virtually.

During the rest of 2020, 2021, and even into 2022, we enjoyed many virtual offerings at the chapter, region, and national levels.

I would like to add a few more ways that NATS serves our independent teacher members through the lens of our shared **Values**:

- **Support** voice professionals within the studio, classroom, clinic, and performance venue.
- **Provide** committed leadership to achieve our mission and vision.
- **Advance** ethical principles and practice in our profession.
- **Celebrate** and recognize the value and efforts of all.
- **Encourage** individual skills and creativity.

SUPPORT You

The NATS *Journal of Singing* (JOS) is a valuable resource of support for our members who are independent teachers. In addition to the excellent content throughout the JOS, NATS dedicates a column to independent teachers: *The Independent Teacher*. JOS Editor-in-Chief, Richard Sjoerdsma, initiated this column in 2002 under the name *The Private Studio* and renamed it in 2012. Associate Editors, responsible for their columns' content, often call for guest submissions. I encourage independent teachers to consider [submitting articles](#) that they would like to share with their colleagues.

Another column is this one, *Independent Voices*, which appears in our semi-annual **Inter Nos** newsletter. In this column, NATS gives special emphasis toward advancing the work of our independent studio teachers. This is a key resource for studio voice professionals offering practical solutions for non-university, independent studios and inspiring success stories of our entrepreneurial members. Send article

submissions or topic suggestions

CynthiaVaughn@icloud.com.

Everyone may view the *Independent Voices* [articles and archives](#).

NATS also supports our members through [NATS Chats](#), our live online real-time discussions for voice teachers and singers. From the comfort of your home or studio, you can enjoy topics that vary widely and have included classical and CM (commercial music) vocal technique, vocal repertoire, teaching strategies, business strategies for independent teachers, and arts advocacy. Guests have included prominent teachers, authors, composers, and artists.



Left: Renee Namakau Ombaba with Diana Allan. Right: Diana Allan with Karen Michaels.

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The **NATS Intern Program**, our innovative and immersive professional development experience, seeks to pair recognized master teachers with early-career members of NATS. Within an intensive format designed to promote the dynamic exchange of ideas and techniques, the goal is to improve substantially the studio teaching skills of the voice interns. The 2023 interns have already been identified, but if you’ve been teaching less than five years, we will be looking for the Intern Class of 2024 next December. Please consider applying.

The **NATS Live Learning Center** is a portal of online learning opportunities. The portal contains live recordings of sessions that were originally held in person, including NATS conference sessions and workshops. The 2022 Chicago conference presentations are available now. This is an invaluable repository of our collective expertise. You will find many of our independent teacher colleagues on these pages.

PROVIDE Committed Leadership for You

It is extremely important that NATS leadership be as varied as our membership. In our **I.D.E.A. Best Practices Guide**, we encourage chapter and region leaders to seek out the

perspectives of colleagues who have different backgrounds and expectations. NATS activities and events will benefit greatly from having diverse leadership. NATS is committed to making sure that we recruit independent teachers for leadership positions at all levels, including at the national level for national officers and national committee positions.

ADVANCE Ethical Principles and Practices

NATS is committed to making sure that all NATS events and activities are inclusive and represent the diversity of our membership. Often, when we think about I.D.E.A., our minds go to ethnic inclusion, diversity, and equity. Although these issues are extremely important, of equal importance is inclusion, diversity, and equity in our programmatic offerings in regards to our independent teachers. It is our ethical duty to ensure that we are serving our members’ varied interests.

If you have not accessed our **I.D.E.A. Toolkit** and completed Modules 1 and 2, please check them out today. We have worked long and hard on these educational modules as a way to support our members and combat unconscious bias.

CELEBRATE and Recognize All

One way we celebrate independent teachers is with the **Joan Frey Boytim Awards for Independent Teachers**. Thanks to a significant gift from independent teacher Joan Frey Boytim, NATS is able to award \$1,000 to one NATS member from each of the NATS regions to attend the NATS national conferences. These awards are designed to recognize and support independent teachers who do not hold full- or part-

time teaching positions at a college or university. Up to 14 fellowships will be awarded to attend the 58th NATS national conference in Knoxville, Tennessee, in 2024. The deadline will be February 1, 2024. Please consider applying.

ENCOURAGE You

Our newly formed NATS **Affinity Groups**, voluntary member resource groups within NATS, enable members to meet together and build connections based on shared characteristics or interests. Members called for this and we listened. Several groups have been formed, and there are plans to establish more groups as members express interest in leading or joining one. I encourage you to check out this opportunity to create and experience a space where you can network and encourage other teachers like you. You've got a friend in we.

Another way NATS is encouraging our members is with the **Emerging Leaders Awards**. These awards are designed to recognize and support NATS teachers with no more than 10 years of teaching experience. This award helps selected recipients attend sessions, network with colleagues, and enjoy all the benefits available at the NATS national conference. Recipients receive up to \$750 to pay for expenses for travel, housing, registration, food, and other related costs. Many independent teachers have received these awards. Please consider taking advantage of this opportunity.

Members and students across our association are being encouraged by supporting **Vocal Music Scholarships** that are designed to support students who might not otherwise be able to afford studying voice. In addition to helping the student, our teacher members are paid through these programs. We have been inspired recently by Texoma's **Vocal Music Fellowships**. They have just awarded their first four fellowships to deserving students and several independent teachers are benefiting from the opportunity to work with these students.

These are just a few of the ways that NATS is serving independent teachers.

2. What are some ideas and plans that NATS, under your leadership, has for independent teachers in the near future?

I have only been NATS President for six months, so in this short time I have been continuing some of the fine work of my predecessor, Past President Carole Blankenship. Namely, the completion of Modules 2 and 3 of our I.D.E.A. Toolkit. These modules help us ensure that all voices — independent

studio teachers, academic studio teachers, and other voice professionals — are valued and heard in an inclusive environment with equitable treatment for all.

We know that many of our independent teachers teach children and youth, who have not been included in National Student Auditions (NSA) to this point. Beginning with the 2024 NSA cycle, 16 new categories will be added to include children and youth, as well as commercial music. We are very excited about this addition. Once again, NATS members have been calling for this and we have listened.

NATS is intent on increasing participation in our excellent winter and summer workshops and national conferences. Having just attended the 2023 Winter Workshop in Miami this past January, I am happy to report that five of the six presenters were independent teachers. This remarkable lineup of presenters was a treasure trove of valuable expertise that I wish more of our members had experienced. We are currently discussing ways that we can provide greater access to our winter workshops in off-conference years. One way might be to offer this workshop as a virtual experience. I would love to know what you think about this. Contact me at president@nats.org.

Believe it or not, we are already making plans for our 2024 national conference to be held in Knoxville, Tennessee. Our call for proposals is accepting submissions now through June 1, 2023. When vetting conference proposals and choosing the programs and presentations, we cannot very well choose diverse programs or ones that apply to independent teachers if you do not apply. I encourage you to think of sharing your expertise and making a proposal to perform or present at our next national conference. I would love to see you there!

3. What are some ways that independent teachers can get more involved in NATS?

Many of the opportunities available to independent teachers have been listed above. I encourage you to take advantage of the professional development opportunities I have mentioned (*Journal of Singing*, *Inter Nos*, NATS Chats, NATS Intern Program), volunteer to be a NATS leader in an area that you are passionate about, complete our I.D.E.A. modules, apply to attend the conference as a Joan Frey Boytim Independent Teacher awardee, start or join a NATS Affinity Group, or apply to be an Emerging Leader.

In addition to these outstanding opportunities, I recommend you explore and take advantage of the **NATS Mentoring Initiatives**. These are invaluable experiences that include

the NATS **Mentored Teaching Experience**, a mini-intern program experience that takes place at many of our summer and winter workshops; **Mentoring Over Coffee**, a free chance to speak with a mentor — just like it says — over coffee, at our national conference, and **National Mentoring Collaborative**, an opportunity to improve your skills, collaborate with new people, and consider new strategies. These initiatives have received a high-level of satisfaction on our follow-up surveys. The connections made through mentoring bolster the **NATS Diversity and Inclusion statement**, “to be a welcoming and supportive community of members and students who celebrate the unique identities, varied backgrounds, and experiences of all individuals.”

As you may have probably seen the announcement, we have sent out a **call for nominations** for national officer positions. We need to hear more independent voices. I encourage you to consider nominating someone you know who would be willing and able to serve, or consider nominating yourself. In addition to national service, please consider serving as a chapter and region leader. We always have more room at the table. I appreciate you and all that you bring to NATS. I would like nothing more than to welcome more of our colleagues into NATS as members. If you know of a colleague who has not yet renewed their membership or is not a member, I encourage you to reach out. Tell them about the addition of our new NSA categories and some of the opportunities I have listed here.

As NATS President, I would love to hear from you. In what areas has NATS been of help to you? What feedback do you have about how NATS can help you even more?

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to write about what NATS is doing and is committed to doing for independent teachers in our association. In this short six months, I have had the pleasure of meeting so many new friends in NATS and I look forward to meeting you! After all, NATS is: Many voices, one passion — singing!

Diana Allan, soprano, has appeared in operatic and concert performances throughout the Midwest and Southwest United States, Germany, the Czech Republic, Italy, Mexico,



Top left: Diana Allan and Linda Poetschke. Top right: Diana Allan and George Hogan. Bottom: Diana Allan, Sandra Oberoi, Sarah Holman

and Brazil. Allan has more than 30 years of university-level teaching experience and recently retired after 26 years on the voice faculty of the University of Texas at San Antonio. She is currently a member of the voice faculty of Missouri Southern State University. Allan is the author of “*The Mindful Musician: Physical and Mental Strategies for Optimal Performance*,” (2022) published by Shanghai Conservatory of Music Press, Ltd., and she is co-author of “*The Relaxed Musician: Mental Preparation for Confident Performances*” (2011). Allan has enjoyed more than three decades of membership in the National Association of Teachers of Singing, and she has served as Texoma region governor, Texoma auditions chair, NATS national vice president for auditions, NATS national president-elect, and, in July 2022, assumed the role of NATS national president.