

## Volunteering and Paying it Forward

By Cynthia Vaughn, Associate Editor for Independent Voices

This will be my final issue as associate editor of “Independent Voices” for NATS Inter Nos. For the past 10 years, since fall 2016, I have edited or written 94 articles and columns by and for independent voice teachers. (Yes, I counted!)

I firmly believe that if we have been given opportunities to lead and create, at a certain point we are obligated to share that opportunity — to pay it forward, to step aside and let someone else to take our place.

I am so grateful for all of the independent NATS members who have submitted articles on a wide-range of topics including mentoring, virtual recitals, connection, mindfulness, teaching children, teaching senior adults, vocal health, composer collaborations, memory care choirs, semi-private and group lessons, piano skills for singers, naming your studio, diversity and inclusion, complementary modalities, transitions (from academia to independent, from big city to small city, from teaching to a career change, from full studio to retirement), social media, virtual assistants, studio management, boundaries, pets in the studio, singers’ health and more.



NATS Intern Program 2006, University of Missouri, Kansas City. Cynthia Vaughn, front row, second from left. Intern Matthew Hoch back row, second from left.

I firmly believe that if we have been given opportunities to lead and create, at a certain point we are obligated to share that opportunity — to pay it forward, to step aside and let someone else to take our place. A life-changing moment for me happened in 2006 while I was the vocal literature coordinator and publishers’ liaison for the NATS Intern Program at University of Missouri, Kansas City. One of the guest speakers was a UMKC dean who encouraged the interns and faculty to “pay it forward.” He told us to hold lightly to esteem, honors and hierarchy, to thank those who have helped us up the career ladder, and, most importantly, to use our power, privilege, and place to help others achieve their own. I was so inspired by his speech, that during the Q&A period at the end, I raised my hand and said,

*“Several years ago, I started something called NATS Chats as a way to connect members online to discuss voice-related topics. I would like to step aside and offer the opportunity to host NATS Chat to anyone in this group of NATS Interns. You are the future of our organization. Who will take this opportunity?”*

Matthew Hoch, one of the 2006 NATS Interns raised his hand almost immediately. “I’ll do it!” Matthew (who would become a lifelong friend and my book editor 20 years in the future!) became the new volunteer host of NATS Chats, adding his own innovations. A few years later he passed that opportunity on to Kari Ragan, the outstanding current host who reaches hundreds of voice teachers each episode. NATS Chats had started very small as an offshoot to the Vocalist listserv in the 1990s, expanded to a designated America Online chatroom using dial-up internet, and finally as a dedicated audio-video interview format available live and recorded.

Fast forward to 2012, my final year as vocal literature coordinator and publishers’ liaison for the NATS Intern Program, a volunteer position that Roy Delp had offered me beginning in 2005. Over the years, I had been keeping my eyes out for a NATS Intern who would be ideal as the next vocal literature coordinator, someone who was just as nerdy about vocal literature as I was and who would take on the huge task of reaching out to publishers to request donations of music for the interns, as well as preparing



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and presenting interactive vocal literature sessions for the interns and faculty. I found my successor at the 2011 NATS Intern Program that took place at University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire. Tana Field and I talked for hours about favorite vocal repertoire, composers, and new publications, and when I asked if she might be interested in serving as the next NATS Intern Program vocal literature coordinator, she immediately said, "Yes!" Not, "Let me think about it" or "I'm too busy" or "What does it pay?" (PS: *It pays nothing. It's a volunteer position.*) I highly recommended Tana Field to NATS leadership and Tana took over the role as NATS Intern Program vocal literature coordinator and publishers' liaison in 2013. She currently continues in this important role and is doing an amazing job.

There are two things necessary to pay forward a volunteer leadership role: someone to let go and someone to say "Yes. I'll do it!"

In 2016, I was on the receiving end of such generosity. Nancy Bos, associate editor for "Independent Voices" for NATS *Inter Nos*, recommended me as her successor. I had contributed a few articles for "Independent Voices" at Nancy's request during her editorship, and she knew I was an experienced author and editor. At that time I had co-authored three editions (now four) of "The Singing Book" group-voice textbook/song anthology with Meribeth Dayme. I had previously been a paid assistant editor and writer for *Classical Singer Magazine*. I had left academia to found and direct a multi-teacher community music school, Magnolia Music Studio.

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Nancy could have assumed I was too busy or not interested in an unpaid editorship. Instead, she recommended me to the NATS leadership, and I received a phone call from the executive director, Allen Henderson. After our lengthy conversation, I said, "Yes. I'll do it." I had a caveat. "I'd like the "Independent Voices" articles to be available in the *public* area of the NATS website (not behind the member pay-wall) so that they can be freely shared by the writers and even be a recruiting tool for new independent NATS members. "I'm pretty sure we can do that." Thanks to that conversation and the NATS tech wizards, you can now read all of the issues of [Independent Voices](https://www.nats.org/independent-voices) from 2014 (when the publication went digital) to present in the public area of the NATS website.

*Side note: I had nearly forgotten that I had already written for Inter Nos! In the 1990s when Julie Fortney was editor of the print version of the Inter Nos member "newsletter" she had invited me to author a new column called "Currents." It was a play on words — all about current trends in voice teaching and an introduction to the internet for voice teachers. Now, 35 years later, information technology and artificial intelligence is so common that I can barely remember when the "world wide web" was a new thing.*



Deborah Conquest

Now it is 2025, and I am ready to pay it forward. Last year I told NATS leadership that I was thinking about stepping down after the fall 2025 issue. I recommended my successor and NATS began the vetting process a few months ago, which included submitted materials, writing samples, and an interview. I am thrilled to announce that beginning with the spring 2026 edition of NATS *Inter Nos*, the new associate editor for "Independent Voices" will be **Deborah Conquest**.

Deborah is already familiar to *Inter Nos* readers as she has contributed past articles and referred other writers to "Independent Voices." She is an accomplished voice teacher, performer, and writer based in Rochester, New York. Deborah runs an independent voice studio — Conquest Voice Studio — where she trains singing actors worldwide. She is a longtime NATS member, recipient of a Joan Boytim Independent Teacher Award, and proud alumnus of the Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music and SUNY Fredonia. Deborah loves hiking, rockabilly tunes, competitive powerlifting, house plants, and chocolate cake — not necessarily in that order. Lately, she's been exploring the visual arts — mostly pretending she can paint — and aspires to write her memoirs entirely in haiku. Deborah shares insights and inspiration on her blog at [conquestvoicestudio.com](https://conquestvoicestudio.com). *Fun fact: she started her career as the "Ivory Snow Baby" and became a SAG-AFTRA union member at the age of six months.*

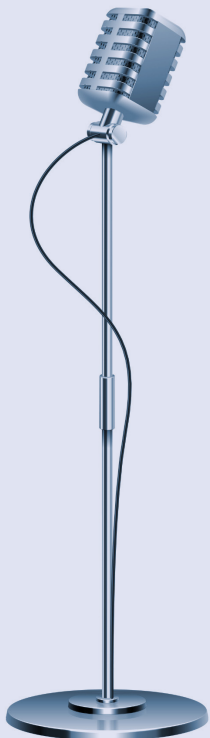
This fall 2025 issue of "Independent Voices" is one of the best, jam-packed with great articles from esteemed colleagues on a wide variety of topics: Jessica Fielder shares some great strategies and resources for guiding teen students to choose musical theatre songs. David Sisco writes an insightful article about what teachers can do when students "ghost" us and don't return to lessons. (Hint: try not to take it personally.) Karen Michaels reminds us that you don't have to limit yourself to one traditional niche — you can lean into being a "multi-hyphenate," embracing all of your creativity. Learn why Kim Lamoureux swears that she will never give another



traditional student recital. Megan Durham and Christina Kent encourage teachers to give our students a safe place to fall, to unlearn their perfectionism and ours. And finally, John Seesholtz, co-founder of *The Canciones Project*, writes a personal and powerful essay about overcoming imposter syndrome and finding his true authentic voice and work.

I hope that you, too, will be inspired to explore your own thoughts about independent studio teaching and to submit an "Independent Voices" article to associate editor Deborah Conquest for consideration for the spring 2026 issue. The deadline is January 15, 2026. In the meantime, I'll still be around! Look for me in-person at NATS chapter, region, and national workshops, as well as auditions and conferences. You can also find me on Substack (*Singing in the Key of Me*), Facebook, and my website [CynthiaVaughn.com](https://CynthiaVaughn.com).

**Cynthia Vaughn**, associate editor for NATS Inter Nos "Independent Voices" fall 2016 to fall 2025 has been a proud NATS member and independent teacher since 1983. She has been active in NATS leadership at the chapter and region levels, and was an invited master teacher for the 2020 NATS Intern Program (postponed to 2021 due to COVID). Before moving to Norfolk, Virginia, in 2022, Vaughn retired from Magnolia Music Studio, the multi-teacher studio she founded and directed in Colorado and Washington from 2008 to 2022. In addition to her independent studios, Vaughn previously taught voice at Colorado State University, Cedarville College, and Art Connects International. Publications include *The Singing Book* group-voice textbook and song anthology with co-author Meribeth Dayme. The new 2024 fourth edition with editor Matthew Hoch is available from Bloomsbury Publishing/NATS Books (formerly Rowman & Littlefield).



## Your Voice Matters!

### Guidelines for submitting articles for Independent Voices

Spring deadline: July 15

Fall deadline: January 15

- Current *independent* member of NATS (not teaching primarily at a university): Professional/Emerging Professional/Pre-Professional, Emeritus
- 1,000 to 2,500 words
- Preferably written in "first person"
- Any topic that is relevant to independent voice studio teachers, collaborative pianists, choral directors...
- Attach as Word doc or Mac Pages, standard font (Times New Roman, Arial, Helvetica)
- Include 100-word or less author bio at the bottom of the document. (See bio examples in [past articles](#).)
- Photos: required high resolution headshot (jpg) and optional additional photos (jpg) related to the article. Important: *Do not imbed photos into the document. Send as separate attachments.*

Email to Independent Voices Associate Editor Deborah Conquest at [internos@nats.org](mailto:internos@nats.org)