



## Transitions: From Private Studio to Community Music School

by Sharon Szymanski, Chapel Hill School of Musical Arts

I never saw myself as an entrepreneur when I began private teaching, but it turned out that the skills that made me a good voice teacher led me unerringly in that direction. How so?

**Voice teachers care:** I saw that there was a large demand in our arts-supportive community for good singing instruction and I wanted to help.

**Voice teachers are good communicators:** I put my written and verbal skills to good use creating marketing materials, doing free workshops and speaking with parents.

**Voice teachers are excellent puzzle solvers:** Just as we analyze strengths and challenges with students and devise creative strategies and processes to “complete” the puzzle that is a singer, I took the same approach with business and organizational needs and came up with creative solutions.

**Voice Teachers are passionate:** When you are truly passionate about your business, everyone feels it and it thrives!

In 2000 I moved from adjunct teaching at UNC-Chapel Hill to teaching privately. Within the first few months I realized that the demand was too high for me to handle alone, so I hired an additional person to teach with me. I actively marketed our

lessons to community schools, churches and theater groups and word of mouth grew along with our student population. Within a few years, Szymanski Studios boasted five voice teachers and over 100 students, all taking lessons in my home and adjacent apartment space! As the business grew organically, so did my sense of purpose, my goals and intentions and my business acumen. In this I was assisted by my husband, who had been in corporate sales and marketing, and my own background in public relations and

other fields. However, I believe it was my authentic and caring relationship with people that proved to be my most valuable gift.

Before we took on this business venture, we assessed our financial situation and our comfort level with financial risk. We made our initial business decisions based on what was most appropriate and what financing options were comfortable for us.



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## continued: From Private Studio to Community Music School

In our case, the least risky option was to utilize our house and apartment as teaching space until we could afford commercial space. Other affordable options would be to rent affordable space in a local church, school, or music store.



and we have hired teachers to accommodate them all, including teachers who speak Korean and Spanish, and two Music Therapists who offer adaptive lessons to those with special needs.

As the studio grew, we reassessed our situation. It was clear that we were meeting a real need in our community and that we could consider applying our philosophy and expertise to the instruction of other musical instruments. Piano lessons were an obvious choice, as was instruction in guitar. In 2008 we rented our first commercial space, working out instrument purchases with a local piano company, and hiring additional teachers. Along the way, we attended business seminars for music school owners, talked to other people doing what we were doing, and learned a great deal. Not everything ran smoothly, and we worked long, hard hours. We realized that when you love what you do and are motivated to provide a secure financial future for yourself and family, it is indeed a labor of love!

We continued to add more instruction in more instruments and additional space until we had become, in essence, a true music school, offering instruction in everything from Suzuki violin to band instruments along with our previous lessons. In 2012 we changed our name to better reflect what our business had become: Chapel Hill School of Musical Arts. Our latest evolution happened just last year, when we purchased a 3500 sf building to house our 400 plus students and thirty teachers and also added a Theater Arts program to our offerings.

We didn't do everything on our own! We utilized our strengths, and hired others to help in areas where we needed additional expertise like web design or bookkeeping. We familiarized ourselves with our competition, expanded principles and procedures we already had in place, and marketed and networked to grow our student population. Learning to delegate tasks was one of the greatest challenges I faced, but I can say now that it was a really necessary growing pain. Along the way, we carved out a unique and personally appropriate style of business, our “branding.” We are a large school that accepts students with diverse interests and goals

Hiring other teachers has been a challenge, but a good place to start is former students, NATS or MTNA colleagues, recent college graduates, LinkedIn, referrals, etc. We are now in the enviable position that we are often contacted by potential teachers who are interested in working with us. We look at many qualifications: degrees, experience in teaching, collegiality, responsibility, versatility (one of my earliest questions to voice teacher applicants was always, “Can you teach a Disney song?”), special training and personality. For me, this last is in many ways the most important. A good teacher needs to be able to interact well with a number of different kinds of students, to relate to their parents and to behave in a professional and collegial manner at all times. My “gut” has seldom led me astray when hiring my teachers. We’ve recently completed our annual meetings with teachers to review the year and renew contracts, and have been very gratified by how many of our teachers said that they loved working at our school.

To return to my initial statement: Did I wake up one morning and decide to open a music school? Absolutely not! But had many of my life experiences and my training helped prepare me to create such a wonderful outcome? And did my love of music and sharing it with others in the company of wonderful colleagues influence the way things evolved? With enormous gratitude, I reply, “Yes!”

*Sharon Szymanski is former president of both the Durham Music Teachers Association and the Chapel Hill Music Teachers Association, and served on the Executive Boards of NCMTA and NCNATS. Previously she taught voice at UNC-Chapel Hill and was Associate Director of the Delaware Music School. Sharon co-presented “Rewards and Challenges of a Multi-Teacher Studio” (with Cynthia Vaughn) at the 2016 NATS Conference, and presented “Expanding the Private Voice Studio” at the 2006 NATS National Conference. Sharon mentors and coaches other teachers. She is an active performer, who continues to work with singers of all ages, backgrounds and vocal abilities covering all genres of music.*