

# Taking a Different Path: From Voice Teacher to Speech-Language Pathologist

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## INTRODUCTION

**I**N A 2019 *JOURNAL OF SINGING* ARTICLE, D. Brian Lee outlines the many advantages voice teachers may enjoy when they take on “non-voice-related jobs.”<sup>1</sup> He highlights how they can provide financial stability, an outlet for creative pursuits outside of music, and the freedom to take on students and performance opportunities out of desire rather than necessity.

Besides non-voice-related jobs, many voice teachers also find themselves drawn to music adjacent careers, where the skills they have developed as singers and educators are even more directly applicable. One of these fields is speech-language pathology.

According to the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA), speech-language pathologists (also called SLPs) are experts in communication who work with people of all ages to treat many types of communication and swallowing problems.<sup>2</sup> They have a variety of areas of focus, including addressing problems with speech sounds (how we create sounds and put sounds together into words), language (how well we understand what we hear or read and how we use words to tell others what we are thinking), and voice (how our voices sound).<sup>3</sup>

SLPs work in a variety of settings, including private practices, physicians’ offices, hospitals, schools, colleges and universities, rehabilitation centers, and long-term and residential health care facilities.<sup>4</sup>

This column will provide profiles of two voice teacher-singers who have shifted to speech-language pathology (one working professional and one current graduate student). We will explore their backgrounds and experiences, the elements that led them to shift careers, and how their work as voice teachers informs their work in speech-language pathology.

## MUSICAL BEGINNINGS

Elizabeth Lanza claims she was in love with musical theatre from day one. She means this quite literally, since the soundtrack to *Guys and Dolls* was playing in the background when she was born. Her parents—both theatre *aficionados*—provided a steady stream of classic Golden Age musicals like *Oklahoma*, *Camelot*, *My Fair Lady*, and *Fiddler on the Roof* in their house during her formative years. The season tickets her family held at their local Equity theatre also allowed for many opportunities to see live, professional

theatre up close. Lanza specifically remembers watching the actors on stage and thinking, “I could do that!” In fact, she did “do that,” albeit on a much smaller stage, as she and her cousin would regularly mount their own living room productions of *The Little Mermaid* and *Beauty and the Beast*.

Even at that early age, Lanza appreciated music as a vehicle for storytelling, which only grew throughout middle school and high school. She credits her high school choir director and “an incredibly supportive voice teacher” for playing significant roles in her decision to major in music in college and to pursue it as a career.

Megan Lee similarly developed a love of singing that began in early childhood. Instead of the footlights of the theatrical stage, however, she found her passion in the choir stalls of a cathedral. When she was 10 years old, Lee began attending the renowned Madeleine Choir School in Salt Lake City, where—instead of *Oklahoma* and *Camelot*—she sang everything from Gregorian chant to Poulenc.

Lee never considered herself a “natural” when it came to singing. Although she developed strong musicianship, sight-reading skills, and choral singing abilities throughout her schooling, she felt that singing always presented challenges to overcome. When she first started taking voice lessons, it was primarily because of her goal to get into one of the top choirs at her school. However, she soon became fascinated with vocal technique, the mind-body connection, and the functioning of the vocal mechanism.

Studying voice in college seemed a logical next step, given how her background had placed her on that path. But she also viewed pursuing voice at the next level as a personal challenge. Knowing how hard she had worked on her singing during her teen years, she saw college vocal studies as a tremendous opportunity for self-exploration.

## COLLEGE AND EARLY CAREER

When Lanza enrolled at Illinois Wesleyan University, it was initially as a music education major. Her deep love of performing, however, prompted a switch to vocal performance in her sophomore year. Even though the focus of the degree centered around classical genres,

she maintained a love for theatre and still felt pulled in that direction.

Upon graduation, she moved back to her native Chicago and immediately jumped into “the artist’s lifestyle,” squeezing in auditions between multiple day jobs (including nannying and the obligatory waiting tables, but also teaching voice lessons at high schools in the Chicagoland suburbs). She began to get work in non-Equity theatres, gaining important experience and opportunities to build her skills. Gradually, she garnered the attention of Equity-level houses and started earning points toward Actor’s Equity Association (AEA) membership. After some out of town gigs and a stint with Disney Cruise Line, she landed her first lead with a Chicago Equity house in 2013. This allowed her to join AEA, which led to more consistent (and better paying) work on stage.

Unlike Lanza, Lee entered college as a voice performance major from the start, expecting that she would immediately go on to earn a master’s degree, with the hope that it would lead to a career in operatic performance. After one year out of state, she returned home and transferred to the University of Utah, with the primary intention of building a healthy, sustainable vocal technique. Through study and exploration of voice pedagogy, she started to learn effective teaching strategies that were applicable beyond her own voice.

As the end of her senior year approached, she realized she would need to find a way to financially support her singing. After graduation, while she continued to sing for liturgical services and began to perform with early music chamber ensembles, she also started teaching private voice lessons as a way to earn income and continue learning about the voice.

## SEEDS OF CHANGE

Lanza recalls two specific experiences that got her thinking she may want to pursue a different path. The first experience began when one of her vocal coaches asked if she could take on a young singer as a voice student. The student, though only 13 years old, was already acting professionally in Chicago. When they started their work together, Lanza noticed significant tension that, as their lessons continued, led her to suspect that there may be something more at play. She recommended

the student see one of the otolaryngologists in the city who was known for working with singers. When the student's videostroboscopy revealed vocal fold lesions and muscle tension dysphonia, she began voice therapy with a speech-language pathologist at the same clinic. Lanza requested to sit in on the therapy sessions in order to learn more about what the work between SLP and patient looks like and to see how that might transfer over to lessons when her student was cleared to start singing again. "I stayed in communication with this SLP throughout the rest of my time working with the student," Lanza says, "and loved hearing her expertise, and almost envied the knowledge she had about the voice that I couldn't provide to my student."

The second experience occurred when the little boy Lanza was nannying began Early Intervention SLP services for his speech. When she saw the significant progress he made in only three to four months of work, she was inspired to volunteer at a local inpatient rehabilitation hospital. Once a week, she shadowed an SLP who specialized in working with people who had experienced strokes. Through her performance connections, she formed relationships with two local actors-turned-SLPs who continued occasionally to be involved in theatre. "They answered so many questions for me, and were fabulous resources," she says. "I think part of me was worried that if I switched careers, it would negate what I had worked so hard for, or that I would have to change as a person. But all of these positive people and experiences became too much to ignore, and I began to really feel that tug."

Lanza admits to having felt overwhelmed at first by the prospect of returning to school and committing to a two- to three-year degree program. In the end, she decided to take at least one class to give it a chance. If it turned out not to draw her interest, she could simply walk away. "I took one class, and I loved it," she says. "The course content, being back in school, all of it—it just fit and clicked, and I knew I was ready to make the jump." She eventually completed her M.A. degree in the Communication Disorders program at Northern Illinois University in 2018.

For Lee, her interest in voice pedagogy led her to speech-language pathology. Tasked with an assignment of creating a voice course, she began seeking the most in-depth sources on vocal function she could find.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the most accurate sources she discovered that held the answers to her biggest questions were found in the texts used in communication sciences and speech-language pathology courses.

"I had always admired SLPs and been curious about their work with singers," Lee says, "[but] I only knew about the field from the perspective of voice rehabilitation." That began to change through her work with Cindy Dewey of Utah State University, a voice professor who also holds a bachelor's degree in speech-language pathology. "Her immense knowledge of how voice, sound, and speech production work and her willingness to share her knowledge were the biggest inspiration for me to pursue speech-language pathology."

Over nine years as a voice teacher, Lee encountered students of all ages and at all levels of ability. She took particular interest, however, in the students who had seen voice disorder specialists who needed help getting back to performing. In addition, working with students who believed they were "tone deaf" pushed her to learn more about how individuals hear and interpret pitch and why some people struggle more with singing in tune than others. These experiences, along with her work with transgender and nonbinary singers, further convinced her that her interests in voice extend beyond that of the typical singing studio.

## CURRENT PURSUITS

Lanza is now employed full time as a speech-language pathologist at the Voice Disorders Center at the University of Utah. Although her patient load is divided between those experiencing voice, upper airway, and swallowing disorders, she believes her background as a voice teacher informs her work every day. "My time as a voice teacher gave me the advantage of feeling comfortable during a one on one, hour long session with a new person," she says. "I understood from teaching how vulnerable people feel about their voices, and therefore how to form connections quickly to make students—now patients—feel safe and comfortable. I learned how to approach an issue from multiple angles based on the student's/patient's needs."

She also believes her time on stage impacts her work in the clinic. "As an actor/singer, I learned flexibility, hard work, and how to listen and react authentically,

which serves me well in this new setting,” she says. “I love when I see a professional singer, because I have the vocabulary to connect with them on their level. I know what it’s like to power through eight shows a week when you don’t feel great, and the stress that a voice change can bring on a professional.”

Lanza feels there has been a shift in recent years that allows professional singers to avoid the stigma that often accompanies vocal injury. She actively works to empower the singers and actors she sees and to support them throughout their injuries so they can simply “get back to work.” “I see my years leading up to being an SLP as built-in bonus experience that helps me daily,” she says.

Lee is currently a second year graduate student in the M.S. degree program in speech-language pathology in the Department of Communication Sciences and Disorders at the University of Utah. She also works as a graduate assistant at the Utah Center for Vocology and will be serving an upcoming clinical externship alongside Lanza at the University of Utah Voice Disorders Center.

Through coursework and clinical rotations, Lee has discovered an interest in the treatment of swallowing disorders. At this point, she hopes to become an upper airway specialist, working with patients who need voice, respiratory, or swallowing support. She has also had the opportunity to work with transgender voice clients during her studies, and hopes to continue that work in a clinical setting, as well.

Despite a demanding schedule, Lee occasionally still sings for liturgical services and in chamber music settings. She also maintains a small teaching studio of voice students and believes her SLP studies have made her more effective in this work. “Classes in communication sciences and disorders have made me a better teacher, and voice lessons have felt like a fun break from studying,” she says. “I have noticed that feedback I get from clinical supervisors has made me a more effective communicator and voice teacher.

She also believes that teaching voice lessons helps her continue to develop the skills she needs as a beginning clinician. “I am asked to critically listen to vocal qualities, articulation, and prosody on a daily basis, and my ear training as a singer is of huge benefit,” she says. “I am also asked to come up with new exercises or explana-

tions in voice therapy, and my experience as a teacher is invaluable in these scenarios.”

Lee continues to sing and play the piano for her own enjoyment and has recently appreciated exploring other genres like jazz and R&B. When she finishes school, she intends to continue performing with smaller ensembles and also hopes to continue teaching through her private studio.

Lanza, however, has taken a break from performing, and this is the first year since she became an SLP that she has not offered voice or piano lessons. Although her break from performing is partially borne out of COVID-19 restrictions, and while she continues to sing at home, she does not feel the push to be back on stage, understanding firsthand what a commitment that requires. “People are always surprised when I say I don’t have a super strong desire to be on stage right now,” she says. “I lived that life for eight years. I lived it hard, with all of me, and I loved it. But when I moved to [become an] SLP, it just felt right. It never felt like a backup plan—it was a choice, and I love it.”

That being said, she has not yet given up her AEA membership. It is simply on hold for now. “I worked so hard to earn that card, I don’t feel quite ready yet. But just as I knew it was time to go back to school, I trust myself and my gut that I’ll know when I’m ready to return in some capacity to theatre.”

## INSPIRATIONAL INFLUENCES

Both Lee and Lanza are grateful to the teachers, professionals, and mentors who helped them discover their new paths. Lee says, “I was so fortunate to meet and work with intelligent, generous, and open individuals as I became interested in speech-language pathology.”

Lanza agrees, believing that it was these influential individuals who have instilled in her a primary goal of supporting collaboration between singing teachers and speech-language pathologists. “I will forever be grateful to the SLP who allowed me to observe a session for my student when I was a teacher,” she says. “It made me feel more confident working with an injured singer, and I was grateful for the resource. I also feel like teachers are the first line of defense. I want them to feel confident reaching out when they want additional support, and knowing that that contact will be appreciated.”

She also hopes to be part of the network between the two professions that encourages open communication and collaboration. “I would not be where I am today were it not for [the] many singer-turned-SLPs who allowed me to take them out to coffee or lunch, and talked with me openly and honestly about their own experiences,” she says. “Those discussions helped guide me toward where I chose to go to school, what additional coursework/experiences to seek, and even helped me emotionally as I made my career transition.”

### CONCLUSION

It is probably unrealistic to expect 18 year old undergraduate performance majors to be able to set straight lines for their futures that will lead them directly from their education to their careers. Indeed, at that age, there is probably a great deal of ignorance of the field and a justifiable lack of understanding as to what sorts of careers people with performance degrees eventually pursue.

Although this “tale of two SLPs” presents only two stories, we believe it is indicative of the journeys many others have taken who have made the pivot to speech-language pathology and found themselves doing important, rewarding work. This work, as discussed above, often does not necessitate a wholesale abandonment of previous experiences, expertise, or even goals. As we see, in many ways, the skills that singers and voice teachers develop are often directly applicable to, and desirable in, speech-language pathology. Regardless of whether a shift of occupation occurs early, in mid-career, or later in life, when professionals in the field have interdisciplinary knowledge and experience, the entire voice community benefits.

### NOTES

1. D. Brian Lee, “Day Jobs—Expand Your Possibilities,” *Journal of Singing* 76, no. 2 (November/December 2019): 197–201.
2. American Speech-Language-Hearing Association, “Who Are Speech-Language Pathologists, and What Do They Do?”; <https://www.asha.org/public/who-are-speech-language-pathologists/> (accessed August 29, 2021).
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.

**Elizabeth Lanza** is a Speech Language Pathologist at the University of Utah Voice Disorders Center. She specializes in working with individuals with voice, swallowing, and upper airway disorders. Elizabeth holds a master’s degree in Communication Disorders from Northern Illinois University, completed her Clinical Fellowship at the Cincinnati VA Medical Hospital, and received additional training at the Summer Vocology Institute at the National Center for Voice and Speech. She holds an undergraduate degree from Illinois Wesleyan University, where she studied Vocal Performance. Before becoming an SLP, Elizabeth worked as a professional actor, singer, and voice teacher. She is a one-time Jeff Award (Chicago Theater Awards) Winner, three time nominee for Best Actress in a Musical, and is a proud member of the Actors Equity Association. Whether onstage or in the clinic, Beth loves all things related to voice.

**Megan Lee** is a performer, teacher, and vocal coach native to Salt Lake City, Utah. She received her undergraduate vocal performance degree from the University of Utah in 2013. As she has continued to explore vocal technique and its many capacities, she has performed in a wide range of settings, genres, and venues—including opera, musical theatre, liturgy, as well as jazz, pop, and funk. Megan can be seen performing with local chamber groups, cantoring for liturgical services, and coaching bands and choirs. She has taught private voice and piano lessons for the past eight years. Her teaching focuses on vocal anatomy and physiology as the basis for healthy vocal technique, ear training and sight reading, performance anxiety, and recovery from injury. She has also written accredited voice courses through Educational Advantage, having served as music curriculum editor from 2016–2018.

Megan is pursuing a graduate degree in Speech-Language Pathology at the University of Utah to further her understanding of voice science and communication. She will complete a master’s thesis studying voice parameters contributing to gender dysphoria in transgender men. Megan is currently working as a graduate research assistant at the Utah Center for Vocology.

Gentle lady, do not sing  
Sad songs about the end of love;  
Lay aside sadness and sing  
How love that passes is enough.

Sing about the long deep sleep  
Of lovers that are dead, and how  
In the grave all love shall sleep:  
Love is awary now.

James Joyce, “Gentle Lady, Do Not Sing”