

# Happy 80th Birthday, NATS! 1944–2024

Diana Allan



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In celebration of NATS' 80th birthday, this column envisions NATS' future by drawing inspiration from Dan Buettner's research on Blue Zones—regions where people live extraordinarily long and healthy lives. Buettner's insights serve as a framework for contemplating NATS' and NATS members' longevity and well-being.

**A**S NATS BEGINS 2024, I wish us all a happy 80th birthday. NATS was founded on March 23, 1944 when, in Cincinnati, Ohio, at a luncheon during the annual convention of the Music Teachers National Association (MTNA), a group of thirteen teachers and eighty-seven proxies voted to bring NATS into existence. I wonder what these founders would think of NATS today and how far we have come to fulfilling their original purpose “to establish and maintain the highest standards of ethical principles and practice in the profession and competence in the voice teaching profession, to conduct and encourage research, to disseminate resulting information to the profession at large, and to encourage effective cooperation among vocal teachers for their protection, welfare, and advancement”?<sup>1</sup>

When thinking of our long history, I am reminded of a documentary I recently watched, the film *Live to 100: Secrets of the Blue Zones*, based on Dan Buettner's book *The Blue Zones: Secrets for Living Longer*.<sup>2</sup> In both the film and the book, Buettner explores the reasons why and how centenarians are living and thriving in areas that have been identified as *Blue Zones*—places around the globe that have an unusually large percentage of their population who are healthy, happy, and living to the age of one hundred and beyond. The six Blue Zones are located in Ikaria (Greece), Loma Linda (California), Nicoya (Costa Rica), Okinawa (Japan), Sardinia (Italy), and Singapore.

At the beginning of this new year, and as we reflect on NATS' 80-year history, how might NATS improve and live long into *our* 100s and beyond? How might NATS create our own Blue Zone to keep both us and our membership healthy, happy, and thriving for years to come? Applying the concept of a Blue Zone to NATS could significantly enhance our own longevity and our impact. Here are several common elements of Buettner's centenarians and their applications to NATS as we consider how to create our own Blue Zone.

## STAYING ACTIVE AND EATING WELL

*For the centenarians in Buettner's study, those living longer in these zones are known to engage in consistent daily activity such as gardening or walking, as well as consuming a diet of meals consisting mostly of plant-sourced foods.*

As you know, NATS offers a wide variety of learning opportunities for members designed to nourish us and keep us active, at the forefront of the ever-evolving field of voice education.

In addition to our biennial national conferences, annual workshops, annual Science-Informed Voice Pedagogy Institute, mentoring initiatives, NATS Chats, and Live Learning Center, our local chapters and regions host and produce a wide range of activities. By taking advantage of these local, regional, and national offerings, NATS members remain active and engaged in their own professional development. This commitment to lifelong learning ensures that as educators and performers, we are well-equipped to inspire and guide the next generation of singers.

What is one activity you might choose to add this year to keep you active and thriving?

### HAVING A SENSE OF PURPOSE

*Buettner found that the centenarians he studied had a clear sense of purpose—ikigai for the Japanese (“iki” meaning “life,” and “gai” describing value or worth) who live in Okinawa, and a “plan de vida” (soul’s purpose) for those living in Costa Rica. Not only does this sense of purpose increase life expectancy, but it also enhances the quality of one’s life. Centenarians also found a sense of purpose rooted in contributing to the well-being of others.*

Certainly, Buettner’s research on centenarians’ sense of purpose provides valuable insights that can be applied by NATS members to enhance our own lives both personally and professionally. We can identify much of our own *ikigai* within our teaching and performing careers. Teaching and nurturing our students is deeply fulfilling and recognizing the impact we make can provide a profound sense of purpose.

Another aspect of purpose could be taking time to develop a *plan de vida* for our professional growth. This plan can include setting specific goals related to teaching techniques, voice pedagogy, or performance skills and planning which activities to engage in to help us reach these goals. By having a clear roadmap, NATS members can stay focused and motivated, ensuring continuous improvement and personal fulfillment. Continuous learning not only keeps us active, but is certainly an aspect of *ikigai*—bringing value to our lives.

Like the centenarians, we contribute daily to the well-being of our students by inspiring them, not only academically but also as compassionate and empathetic individuals. By instilling a love for music and fostering

their personal growth, we leave a lasting legacy, transforming lives through the power of singing.

What is your *ikigai* or *plan de vida*? How are you living out your legacy?

### CONNECTING

*Social connectedness has been found to be important to maintaining well-being and promoting longevity, as well as reinforcing a stronger sense of purpose in life. In Okinawa, centenarians participate in lifelong friend groups called “moais,” with whom they give and receive support.*

Connecting within NATS starts with becoming a member. When you join, you become a part of the collective whole, referred to on social media as the *hive mind*. NATS nurtures and sustains us as vital contributors to a larger whole.

Our first *moai* is our students. We teach, support, encourage, and mentor our students and receive so much gratification and joy in return. Another *moai* is a local NATS chapter. We know from our eighty-year history that members who join a chapter are more likely to remain a long-time NATS member. This is how you can stay connected through access to local events, receiving encouragement and mentorship from NATS colleagues, resulting in the feeling like you belong—all such good reasons to join a chapter. Then, connecting at the region level widens your circle of support and encouragement within NATS.

NATS Affinity Groups—voluntary member resource groups within NATS that enable members to meet together and build connection—are yet another important type of *moai* within NATS. Members reached out and asked to form these groups in order to enhance their own sense of connectedness and belonging in NATS. As the NATS Affinity Group webpage states: “You’ve got a friend in “we.”<sup>3</sup> Maybe there is an affinity group you can call your “*moai*.” And, of course, getting involved, volunteering to serve, mentoring or being mentored, and participating in local NATS events, workshops, and conferences can also provide a sense of purpose and a sense that “I belong.”

What is your *moai*? How involved are you now? How involved would you like to be?

## LEARNING TO TAKE TIME FOR REST

*Taking short mid-afternoon naps is common in many of the Blue Zone regions. Many of the people in the Blue Zones reported napping at least twenty minutes, five days per week. That sounds good to me!*

What we as NATS members can apply from this common element of the centenarians is the reality that we need and deserve rest. Rest is restorative. It is necessary to help us regulate our emotions, improve creativity, and enhance alertness. Rest is needed to create space for reflection and absorption of the professional development opportunities we choose to participate in.

There is so much to take advantage of within NATS. I am reminded of the line from one of the Indiana Jones movies: “Choose wisely.” It is important to choose wisely based on our own particular needs and to plan for appropriate knowledge acquisition and assimilation time. Then . . . take a nap!

How will you incorporate rest and rejuvenation into your *plan de vida* this year?

In this, our 80th year, NATS has much to be proud of—we are primarily proud of you, our members. You are spread out throughout this country, Canada, and in thirty-seven countries across the globe. You are teaching, mentoring, supporting, encouraging, learning, volunteering, and leading in so many powerful ways. We are already a vibrant, supportive, and purpose-driven community. We are one big *moai*. Imagine NATS in 2044—at 100. What will we look like then? Let’s take the necessary steps this year to stay active, nourish ourselves with knowledge and rest, enhance our sense of purpose, and stay connected to one another. This will not only prolong NATS’s life, but also our own experiences within NATS. May we all as individuals and as the collective called NATS live long and vital lives, bolstered by *ikigai*, *plan de vida*, *moai*, and *naps*.

Happy 80th Birthday, NATS!

## NOTES

1. The History of NATS, “The Origins,” accessed November 5, 2023, <https://www.nats.org/history-of-nats.html>.
2. Dan Buettner, *The Blue Zones: Secrets for Living Longer* (Washington, D.C.: National Geographic, 2012).
3. NATS Affinity Groups, accessed November 5, 2023, <https://www.nats.org/affinitygroups.html>.

**Dr. Diana Allan**, soprano, has appeared in operatic and concert performances throughout the Mid- and Southwest, and has performed in Germany, the Czech Republic, Italy, and Brazil. In addition to her performing, Dr. Allan has more than 30 years university teaching experience and currently is on the faculty of Missouri Southern State University.

As a certified Peak Performance Coach (2010), Dr. Allan works with musicians to help them identify and assess their unique strengths and challenges, to formulate customized Peak Performance Plans, and to help them learn and improve the mental skills necessary to prepare and perform at peak levels. Dr. Allan is author of *The Mindful Musician: Physical and Mental Strategies for Optimal Performance* (2018) and co-author of *The Relaxed Musician: Mental Preparation for Confident Performances* (2012). Her website, *Peak Performance for Musicians*, has a readership of performers from over 180 countries, and she has coached or worked with performers throughout the United States, Ireland, Australia, Germany, Belgium, Nigeria, and Iran.

Dr. Allan has been a member of the NATS for over 35 years and has enjoyed serving as National President-Elect (2020–22), National Vice President for Auditions (2016–20), Texoma Region Governor (2007–2009), Texoma Region Auditions Chair (2000–2004), South Texas Chapter President (2005–2006), and South Texas Vice President-Auditions.

## NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF TEACHERS OF SINGING

### Membership:

Membership in the National Association of Teachers of Singing is open to any citizen of any country whose professional training and experience qualifying him or her as a teacher of singing.

**Associate Membership** is available for voice teachers and advanced students who have not as yet completed the requirements for full membership.

**Affiliate Membership** is open to persons or groups that are interested in vocal pursuits but are not actually involved in the teaching of singing, such as speech therapists, laryngologists, schools, publishers, and music stores.

### Publications:

Membership includes a subscription to the *Journal of Singing*, the official journal of NATS, and to *Inter Nos*, the NATS Newsletter.

### Information:

Applications for membership may be completed online at [www.nats.org](http://www.nats.org). The website contains detailed information about the qualifications for membership and the Code of Ethics of the National Association of Teachers of Singing.

**Visit the Membership section of [nats.org](http://nats.org) to learn more.**