

Speech for Honorary Doctorate Ceremony May 25, 2011

Chancellor Morgan-Silvester, President Toope, Dean Averill, Faculty, Students and guests

Life is full of surprises and this award of an honorary doctorate is certainly one of them. If someone would have told me 25 years ago that I would be standing on the Chan stage speaking about receiving of an honorary doctorate I would have told them they were crazy.

So, first of all, on behalf of my family, my friends, my singers and my beloved choir members who have led me to this august occasion let me thank you for this unexpected honour.

I think the expectation is that I now craft a very deep message of meaning for you students as you enter this new phase of your life and start to write your life's story. However, the truth is that I'm not an orator – but rather a choir conductor and teacher who, with lots of determination, a bit of talent, and supremely good luck has enjoyed a very fulfilling career.

Of course, my first instinct was to pass out some sheet music and conduct you all in a song, but those of you who know me will know that I would not likely stop rehearsing until we were performance-ready and that would probably mean we'd be here all night.

There are many paths to success and I have been very fortunate to tread a very happy one. What I thought might be relevant is to give you the Reader's Digest version of my artistic career and how that career developed over time – sometimes in most surprising and unforeseen ways.

My undergraduate degree obtained many years ago, was a Bachelor of Arts in Math, English and Education. Despite my love of music my parents thought it unwise to study it as a career path, being concerned that it might not earn me a living, so the next few years found me teaching Math and English, raising my son, and getting my husband through medical school. We moved to Canada in 1971 so my husband could study orthopaedics at UBC and VGH.

In 1978, good fortune smiled on us - my husband, finally got a permanent job. He was able to take over supporting us as well as helping to rear our

son, whereupon I decided to go back to school. After a one year false start in Kinesiology, my inherent love of music drew me first to Douglas College and then to UBC for my music degree with a major in theory. I will never forget the first day I was 'back in class again' – an adult student who knew instantly, that she had finally 'come home'.

I had no serious thoughts about a "musical career" except possibly teaching theory, until one of my very perceptive teachers said, "You know, Diane with your skill set of teaching, music theory and getting along with people, we would like to have you try to start a community choir here at Douglas College". I was already teaching music theory and Basic Musicianship at Douglas so I was happy to take on another challenge.

I had had one course in choral conducting at UBC and liked it but had absolutely no practical experience. But the idea sounded too appealing to pass up, so the Douglas Community Choir began with 12 un auditioned singers, 11 women and one bass (yes, my husband).

My next challenge was to learn something about choral conducting. So I started attending rehearsals of choirs whose work and whose conductors I respected. I sang in Jim Fankhauser's Cantata Singers, assisted Bruce Pullen with the Vancouver Bach Choir and Bach Children's Choirs. I also took a year's apprenticeship with Jon Washburn's Healy Willan Choir, the Vancouver Chorale, and his Vancouver Chamber Choir. At the end of all of this I was offered the position of 'Your Lady of Hospitality' on the VCC's Board of Directors. Needless to say, I was determined to find other options.

By this time, my husband calculated that he and my son, who was now in High School, saw me about 2 nights per week, one of which was spent singing bass and tenor respectively in my community choir.

The real 'craziness' started when a dear friend and UBC grad Morna Edmundson and I decided to call up 20 or so of our talented female singer friends, gather in our living room and sing through a few well chosen charts. Thus was born the Elektra Women's Choir. Despite almost everyone's advice, that two egos large enough to conduct such a talented choir could not possibly remain colleagues and friends, we managed to guide these fabulous women to 22 great years atop the Canadian women's choral scene, and they are now still going strong with Morna at the helm.

Then I made an even crazier foray, this time into the void of the men's choral world by rounding up a smaller group of male singers, borrowing from my community choir and several other choirs in which I had sung or helped conduct, as well as former UBC classmates and started Chor Leoni, making sure that our rehearsals and performances fit into their busy choral lives but also didn't interfere too much with the lives of other choirs in our city.

As a postscript, upon my retirement from Elektra in 2009 I gathered a group of my now slightly older friends and started what, I suspect, will be my final choir, EnChor. Principal requirements are a willingness to sing and a birth certificate dated 1960 or earlier.

It is still mostly a mystery to me how these choirs got to where they got, but by some combination of fun, cooperation, kindness, hard work, dedication and good luck we got to where we are today. During that incredible journey I was also invited to travel around the world to teach, to conduct, to be an ambassador of Canadian music thereby, creating my own story.

So, in a nutshell, that's it. Now from that I'm supposed to offer some iron clad - sure fire - never fail advice on how to succeed in your musical careers. I know you'll each be able to find your own way. What I can give you are a few suggestions:

When I was enrolled and when I taught at UBC, I was always impressed with the school's implicit message that arts and the people who participate in them are important, that they're good for us. Arts aren't just a nice thing to do if one has a little time or can afford it. Arts can't become an 'extra part' of our life and culture –
Arts have the power to challenge our thoughts and assumptions, to inspire, to connect us to each other, to make us better people.

You have a great opportunity to make a difference in the culture of Vancouver and the culture of Canada.

Remain open to change. Don't be afraid to try something new which you would love to do.

Trust your instincts.

Be kind and understanding to people, especially your friends , and especially if and when you ask them to undertake some untried, hair-brained scheme.

Remember to say thank you and give praise generously.

Don't be afraid to admit that someone knows more than you do and take every chance you can to sit quietly and learn from them whether in class, a rehearsal or by attending their performances. Some of my best ideas have been stolen from conductors and choirs I love and admire.

Make a difference with your life. Don't settle for 'good enough' –find and stick to your own standards of excellence.

Make yourself and the world better through your work. Take care of each other. And sing, sing...sing!

Congratulations to all – and good luck. Thank you.