Singing each other home

By Karen Janssen

Threshold Singers Joanne Reynolds, Becky Morgan, Ilene Spector, Nancy Wicks, Emily Rothman and founder Karen Janssen.

Xavier Fané

For those at life's thresholds, the Gunnison Valley Threshold Singers share compassion through music.

I've always loved to sing. My mom tells me I did a lot of it when I was small, entertaining my stuffed animals with heartfelt renditions of my favorite tunes. Though I was painfully shy, Glee Clubs kept me singing through high school, but after that singing was relegated to accompanying my copious vinyl collection. It wasn't until after grad school, while living and teaching in Costa Rica, that I really 'found my voice.' Though my kindergarten class couldn't get enough of "Shake Your Sillies Out," they were equally entranced by the beautiful Spanish ballads I'd been learning with my Costa Rican musician friends. I was far from fluent then, but the words hardly mattered. It was my first true glimpse of the power of the human voice, and I was hooked.

I first heard about Threshold Choir around 18 years ago, close to the organization's inception. I immediately went to its fledgling website and was deeply inspired by the mission of singing for those at the thresholds of life.

The first Threshold Choir began in California in 2000. Ten years prior, founder Kate Munger had sat with a dear friend dying of HIV/AIDS. "I was terrified when the time came to sit by his bedside. I did what I always did when I was afraid; I sang the song that gave me courage. I sang it for 2 ½ hours. It comforted me, which comforted him." From that moment came the vision: honoring those at life's thresholds with compassion shared through song. There are now more than 200 chapters worldwide.

Of course 18 years ago there wasn't a chapter near Crested Butte, so the idea retreated to simmer in the back of my mind for a long while.

After I returned from Costa Rica, music became an increasingly important part of my life, with opportunities to teach children of all ages, sing and play in several bands, and more. Early in 2016, the Song Sisters came together to share my love of song with like-minded women. "Singing in harmony brings a group together in joyous cooperation," said Becky Morgan, a Song Sister from the start. You know that euphoria of hitting a perfect, transcendent rhythm as you ski through untouched powder? Voices floating and locked together can provide a similar high.

The Threshold Choir idea resurfaced when a Song Sister's

cancer returned, with a terminal diagnosis. I proposed the concept to the group, and everyone was immediately drawn to the prospect.

Threshold has a large and ever-expanding repertoire of songs (many written by members), and though groups aren't limited to singing those, we began to focus on learning core pieces we could share. All a cappella (without instruments), we sing rounds, melodies and multi-part harmonies, keeping in mind the goal of providing soothing comfort.

"Music can be a unifying and transformative experience," said Ilene Spector, one of our members. "It's one of the purest forms of resonance, and the peacefulness and love we experience while singing then resonates with those with whom we share it."

We were fortunate to sing for our former member before she passed. "It has been a gift and an honor to sing at bedsides and share the soothing powers of song," said member Emily Rothman. Joanne Reynolds agreed: "It's an enormous privilege to engage in this sacred work."

Feedback has been overwhelmingly positive. We've heard comments like: "It really brightened her day" and "I was soothed and transported." Tears are common, and cathartic.

We officially launched as the Gunnison Valley Threshold Singers in February of 2019. Our first 'official' debut was also our international debut, as we sang at the Union Congregational Church on the Sunday that the service was shared with a sister church in Germany! In addition to several bedside sings, we've also visited the Senior Care facility as well as the hard-working board and staff of Hospice and Palliative Care.

Perhaps what has struck me the most about my involvement with Threshold has been the community that surrounds it. Our small group is certainly remarkable. Currently six of us gather regularly, though others have passed through as their lives allowed. I've also been fortunate to attend two large regional gatherings of the organization. Singing such powerful songs with 270 women (and two men!) from all walks of life was profoundly moving. I marveled that, for whatever reason, every person in the room was motivated to share the gift of song. Not that the Threshold community sings only gentle lullabies. One Saturday night had everyone laughing at a rap (complete with beat boxing) about Colorado's marijuana laws and dancing to old-time fiddle tunes I played with a newfound friend. Music truly feeds the soul.

The bottom line is that dying is a part of living. It's a journey, a sacred time not to be hidden, but to be acknowledged. "Walking Each Other Home" is one of the songs we sing, and that is truly what we aspire to do. Becky summed it up well: "Though music is made physically, using our bodies or instruments, sound is not a physical thing that you can grasp. I like to think that music serves as a bridge between the physical and spiritual worlds, and as such can be a great comfort to those transitioning between the two."

Our services are a gift to the community, free of charge and religious overtones, and available for anyone who might enjoy and/or benefit from the healing power of music. Bedside we sing in a small group (usually two to four people) for a short period of time, so as not to overwhelm. We're open to sharing wherever the music might serve its peaceful and inspiring purpose. We practice generally every other week and welcome new members (who need not be trained musicians). Please get in touch at gvthresholdsingers@gmail.com. cb

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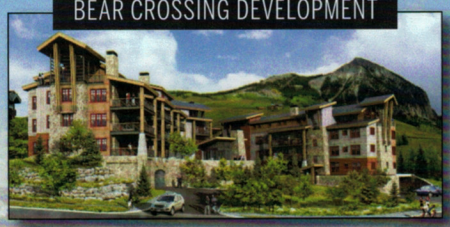

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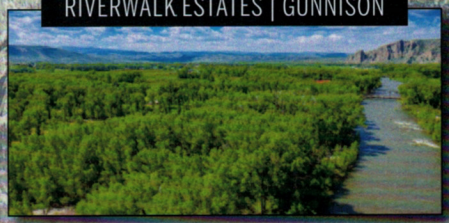

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