

A Joyful Sound

This past weekend I experienced a very special moment which reconnected me with people and a setting whose roots are deep, stemming from my sixty-year history as a member of the Washington National Cathedral choir and student at St. Albans School.

The events were two-fold. At 1 o'clock, as the bells tolled, about fifty former choir-boys, current student choristers from St. Albans School and the National Cathedral School for Girls and parents gathered in the Tower to meet and greet. We recalled stories of our days as wide-eyed innocents who auditioned to become 1st or 2nd Sopranos in this august arena and who aspired to become students at one of the schools on the Cathedral Close. I was delighted to talk with some of the current choir boys and girls and to share in their enthusiasm. On a more somber note, we took time to problem-solve about ways we could help to raise money for the choir program, which is now threatened by the economy.

For me the memories began when I was a wee nine-year old, who was tricked by my mother into auditioning for the Senior Choir under the premise that we were just going on a tour of one of Washington's great monuments. Quite to my surprise we were escorted into the choir room where a giant of a man at 6'4", Richard Wayne Dirksen, then Associate Choirmaster, Director of the Junior Choir, greeted me with a bone-crushing handshake and an invitation to sing the scales. I almost choked. The only other choral performing I had ventured were to sing "A Pretty Girl Is Like a Melody" at my sister's ballet performance and regular shower solos. Somehow I managed to croak a few notes aided by Mr. Dirksen's clever chidings. It helped that he too was a Redskin fan; more about Wayne later.

Speaking of the Redskins, I adopted Slingshot Sammy Baugh, the Skins legendary Quarterback as my hero. Because of the two services on Sunday I wasn't able to see my idol live except on one occasion when I feigned a sore throat in order to play on my mother's sympathy. Little did she know that her brother had garnered two tickets in a raffle and had invited me to a Sunday afternoon game. I will be forever grateful to Uncle Bill for this wonderful treat and relief from the rigorous regimen of a twenty-hour job, in addition to a challenging curriculum and the other activities of a young boy. In no way do I intend to be disingenuous. I am enormously grateful for the opportunity to pursue choral artistry and a first-class education.

Wayne Dirksen was a masterful musician, whose compositions are majestic. On Sunday, the day after the Chorister Reunion, I joined my sister, Jackie, who used to work at the Cathedral, and many fellow Choristers, to listen to many of Dr. Dirksen's works at a special concert at Grace Episcopal Church in Silver Spring. My spine tingled and my chest pounded to the masterful creations of this musical genius. Wayne possessed another gift which I will forever cherish. He knew and loved children. The choir during my tenure consisted of young boys whose boundless energy was sometimes difficult to contain. Wayne knew boys. His children, Rick, Geoff, Laura and Mark worshiped him, evidenced by their own musical and artistic achievements as youngsters and adults. I will

always be grateful to Wayne for his ability to exact the best in us and to balance that discipline with compassion and playfulness. He would entice us to perform exacting compositions by occasionally playing jazz or boogie-woogie, providing a needed point-counterpoint to the process.

Among his many talents, Wayne had quite a throwing arm, too. He would love to toss the football with us in the yard behind the choir room. I give Wayne credit for inspiring me to not only become a life-long music lover, classical and jazz, but an athlete of some note at St. Albans back in the late 50's.

Thanks for the memories.