



Wisconsin Singers Alumni Spotlight on Kathie Sullivan-Tollack



With titles like “Miss Champagne Lady,” “World Vision Advocate,” and “Wisconsin Singer,” it’s no question that Kathie Sullivan-Tollack has a lot of stories to tell. This month’s Alumni Spotlight features Kathie, a Wisconsin Singers alumna who is a former performer on the Lawrence Welk Show and gospel singer.

Kathie grew up in Kenosha, WI, where she was very involved in music. She sang in the church choir starting at age 13 and was in the orchestra from a young age. She picked up the cello, her initial main instrument, in the seventh grade. Singing in the acapella and swing choir in high school, Kathie knew she wanted to go into music after high school – specifically at UW Madison.

Sullivan explains that her parents did not want her to be a student at Madison as it was the height of the Vietnam War protests on campus. However, she was dead set on being a student here, and, after some convincing, they decided to support her endeavors. Kathie lived on the 11th floor of Chadbourne Hall her freshman year of college. Originally majoring in Cello Performance, she took cello and voice lessons across the street at the Humanities Building. After a very successful voice exam, the voice faculty called her back into the room and convinced her to change her major to voice. From that moment forward, she gave up cello and became fully immersed into the vocal world.

In 1972, much to her voice teacher’s chagrin, Kathie auditioned for the Wisconsin Singers and was offered a spot in the troupe. She recalls the group being very popular on campus. In 1972, the troupe was comprised of around 25 people who were all singers and played instruments. Their musical style at the time was very “folksy,” and they did very simple, old-fashioned choreo. She remembers how close everyone was and how they’d perform at high schools, go on road trips, and sing on the bus all the way to their shows and all the way back. In 1974, she was part of a small group of Singers selected to do a USO tour of Iceland, Labrador, and Greenland. This group of 13 experienced many setbacks on the trip, encountering white-out snowstorms where they would have to follow ropes from building to building, and had to persevere through many equipment mishaps with pianos and microphones. This group bonded so much on the trip that they decided to form a group called the State Street Review and take a year off school to do gigs every night at Hoffman House restaurants across the Midwest.

After returning to school to complete her final semester, she entered a contest to be the local “Miss Champagne Lady” in a traveling portion of The Lawrence Welk Show. She won the contest and got to pick up Lawrence Welk from the airport in a limousine. After performing on his show that evening, Mr. Welk called her into his dressing room after the show and offered her a permanent spot on the Lawrence Welk Show. Kathie felt torn between finishing her degree and joining the show, but after her parents encouraged her to take this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, she packed up and was in California two weeks later.

Sullivan was with the Lawrence Welk Show from 1976 until the show's closing in 1982. She recalls the environment of the cast being very similar to that of the Singers; very family-oriented, the older cast took the younger cast under their wing, and everyone worked very hard. "No one was a star," she explains, "everyone pulled their own weight." Kathie sang a variety of musical styles on the show, but says that Mr. Welk loved putting her in musical comedy specials. She loved when the show would go on tour and remembers her travels fondly. She also recalls an instance that the window on their private plane blew out while flying!

After the Lawrence Welk Show ended in 1982, Kathie was introduced to a Christian talent agent and began singing in churches all around Los Angeles. She got a deal with Bread 'N Honey Records, a Christian music label, and recorded three albums with them.

She was a very successful gospel singer for three years, performing all over the U.S and the world. She was asked by World Vision to do a tour of South Africa. She describes this tour as very eye-opening, witnessing drought, starvation, and apartheid firsthand. She was also partnered with Mission Aviation Fellowship and recorded with the Budapest Symphony, with whom she traveled around Europe.

While performing in summer of 1986, some mutual friends reconnected Kathie with her high school sweetheart. They hit it off right away and were married just after Christmas of that year. In this time period, Kathie decided that it was time for a change, and quit touring and performing as a gospel singer. With this, she temporarily moved back to Kenosha to get married to her husband, Hugh Tollack, and start a family.

In 1987, Kathie and her family relocated to the Dallas, Texas, area where they still live today. She took on the role of activity director at a local retirement home where she taught exercise classes and founded a chorus and handbell choir for her residents. She held this position for 17 years until her retirement a couple years ago.

Kathie credits her success to all the love and support she received from her family and friends over the years and explains that she has been "blessed" with a beautiful family and very few hardships.

Kathie also credits her time in Wisconsin Singers for setting her up with the skills she needed for her career: being a team player, a hard worker, and a dreamer.

For current Wisconsin Singers, Kathie Sullivan-Tollack offers this advice: "Never settle for anything you don't want to do, follow your heart no matter how lofty or crazy your ideas are. Follow your dreams, be a team player, remember where you came from, and look to where you're going."



Kathie Sullivan-Tollack performing on the Lawrence Welk Show