

# Threshold choir gives songs as gifts for the dying

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The four women with angels' voices were making the rounds at Penn Hospice at Rittenhouse when they dropped into Virginia Croom's room.

She was 92 and had metastatic cancer and dementia. She looked tiny in her twin hospital bed. But her eyes, legally blind, were lively, and she was the most alert patient on the floor that morning. She was eager to hear music from the Threshold Choir, which sings each week at the hospice.

*In the quiet of this moment, I am at peace. All is well,* the women sang, their voices blending and subtly shifting as they repeated the words like a chant.

Croom listened with her soul, her hand on her throat. She smiled beatifically, a picture of what it means to inhabit a moment.

Two members of the choir had visited a few days earlier. Croom liked one of their songs so much that she asked for its lyrics. She held her daughter's hand with one hand and waved the other with the music as they sang it again.

*I live my life in a river of grace. I trust this river will carry me home.*

Croom's daughter, Denise, wiped her eye. "That was beautiful," she said.

The songs were not hymns, but they had Virginia thinking about the beautiful things that Jehovah had created, of joy that transcends words. "In the voices," she said, "you pick up a whole lot of Bible."

In her way, Virginia Croom understood what Kate Munger, an Inverness, Calif., psychotherapist turned music teacher, was after when she conceived the [first Threshold Choir](#) in 1990. Her idea was for small groups to sing a capella and one-on-one to the dying. The songs would be original, so as not to summon memories — good or bad — that might interfere with the transition at hand. They would not be religious, because many of the patients are not religious. They would be spiritual in their way, a nondenominational form of prayer. The traveling groups would be small and their voices would blend so seamlessly that no individual voice would stand out.

"Ego is gone," Munger said in an interview. "What we're offering is something from our hearts to another human being."

Munger, 67, who still sings in her local Threshold Choir, said there are now 150 chapters in the United States and abroad. The vast majority of the 3,000 singers are female. Most are over 50.

Doris Mogen knew Munger in California and loved her choir idea. After she moved to Colorado Springs, she started a choir there. She moved to Mt. Airy about five years ago and started another choir. The [Philadelphia Threshold Singers](#) now has 23 members. In groups of two to four, they sing at Rittenhouse and at hospices run by the Neighborhood Visiting Nurse Association in West Chester and Springfield Senior Living in Wyndmoor. Lana Noel, the Philadelphia choir's codirector, said they are also working on a program with a yoga center.

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On that Friday last month, Mogen, 68; Noel, 53; Mary Anne Crowley, 68; and Ginger Minnick, 69, moved from room to room, singing a song or two for pale, hollow-cheeked patients deep in the sleep of the dying and for their tired relatives. Several families turned them away, saying they preferred to rest. There was nothing showy about their performance. The women were quiet, respectful, harmonious, meditative. It had the desired effect. This was a gift of peace and compassion.

They started in the room of Charles Seawright Sr., 71, who was sick with lung cancer and sound asleep. His wife, Adrena, welcomed them in.

The quartet sat in a row beside Seawright's bed. "Good morning, Charles," Noel said. "My name is Lana and I've come to the bedside now to sing for you. You don't have to do anything. Just lie back and rest and we'll sing a couple songs."

*May you dwell in the heart, they sang.*

*May you be free from suffering.*

*May you be healed.*

*May you be at peace.*

They hugged Adrena Seawright on their way out.

On to Ed Speedling, who was asleep in bed, breathing raspily while his wife, Jane Lowe, and daughter-in-law, Holly Dranginis, looked on. He was 73 and had learned that he had metastatic pancreatic cancer in September.

*I behold you beautiful one, the women sang. I behold you child of the earth and sun. Let my love wash over you. Let my love watch over you.*

They took three deep breaths between songs to relax and allow the music to settle in. At one point, Speedling moaned loudly. They continued, their concentration unbroken.

*May peace be with you. Peace be with you now. May peace be with you always. Peace be with you, now and always.*

Lowe was in tears when they left. "That was beautiful," she told them.

Later, Adrena Seawright said her husband loved music. He sang in gospel choirs at church. She found the Threshold Choir uplifting and was impressed that they sang with a "servant spirit."

When she first heard them, she said she told them, "Oh, is this beautiful. You know you all sound just like angels."

Lowe thought her husband of 28 years, who also loved music, had responded to the choir. "I thought that that moan was absolutely a moan of sheer delight," she said.

She found the singing soothing. "I think for me it was just creating an enormous sense of peace and ... it reduced the anxiety that comes along with this period of waiting for someone to die. It just feels very healing to me."

It didn't happen that Friday, but Noel said that one of the things she finds most valuable about the choir is its impact on families. Often, when they enter a room, family members are focused on various electronic devices. The TV goes off. Laptops close. "People come around the bed. A family member will put their hand on the patient," Noel said. "Everything becomes focused on the patient at that moment. There's a bonding that happens and it's just the music."

The choir isn't for everybody, Noel said. What successful singers have in common is a "willingness to become still and quiet and connect with ourselves and each other and patients and their family." They have to be willing to look inward and face their own feelings about death. "There's so much inner work to be able to sing at the bedside to be around people who are grieving."

The choir members sometimes see intense grief. Or the music may allow people to feel and express grief they've been denying. It can be hard to watch, but the singers try not to let their own emotions show. "I feel like, if I join their experience, I'm not allowing them to have it," Noel said. She doesn't want families to think they have to take care of her.

Minnick, a former hospice nurse who has always enjoyed singing, found out about the group on Facebook. "It's a way to give back and music touches places in people that speech does not touch," she said.

All of them said they get as much out of the experience as their listeners do.

Mogen talked about the "sense of trust" she feels while harmonizing. When it all comes together, the human connection is deeply spiritual.

"We'll be in a room and all at once it's the sacred space," Mogen said. "It's like we're not even singing. Singing is coming through us ... It's a glorious, glorious feeling."

Noel said that singing with the choir for three years has helped her face her own mortality. When her times comes, she wants to be in hospice. "I hope," she said, "that there's a Threshold Choir when I am in that hospice bed."

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