

Whatcom Watch

Mathilda (Mattie) Wheeler and the Bellingham Threshold Singers

Unsung Heros

By Kathryn Fentress February 2016

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Mattie Wheeler and her husband Andy located here 24 years ago to raise a family. She is currently finishing her thesis novel for a Master's Degree in Fine Arts through the Northwest Institute of Literary Arts. She loves creating art and acting in community theater and is very active as a volunteer singer and member of the leadership team for the Bellingham Threshold Singers.

Kathryn: What is the Bellingham Threshold Singers (BTS)?

Mattie: BTS is a group of women whose mission is to sing by the bed or chair sides of those who are in difficult transitions in their lives, particularly those who are dying. We sing very simple, short songs that are soothing and inspirational to the listener. Our songs are filled with spirit, but we are not affiliated with any faith base. We are all volunteers and offer our service to those who request it.

Kathryn: How do the requests come to you?

Mattie: We have one person who receives the phone requests. She determines whether the request is appropriate and how high a priority the situation is in terms of time. We have answered calls for a dying person within hours of receiving the request. Normally, we have some days to make the arrangements. This person contacts the leaders. We use nautical terms to refer to ourselves and the leaders of the sing are called the anchors. The anchor in turn takes the request depending on her availability. She then reaches out to other singers, called the sails. Usually, two to four of us will go at a time to sing.

Kathryn: Who makes the requests?

Mattie: Various people make the requests; it could be a social worker, a case manager, a hospice worker, a family member, a pastor, or a deep friend who thinks we can be of help to someone in distress. The need may arise from emotional grief, a transition from one place to

another, recovery from a difficult trauma, finding out that they may be dying or are in the process of dying.

Kathryn: When did the group form?

Mattie: The first women gathered in 2007. In 2011, we decided to set up a Board of Directors and a leadership team to help guide the program and established ourselves as a 501(c)3. We became a charity so that we could process donations for training manuals, copies of music, and to send delegates to various trainings. There are no paid positions. We have 28 regular singers currently. There are about 45 members of the choir but not everyone goes to the bedside. We practice twice a month. Jerns Funeral Home has been very generous to us, allowing us a place to practice at no cost.

Kathryn: Please describe the process once you are at the bedside.

Mattie: The anchor helps the singers ground before we go to the bedside. She takes the lead in accessing the person's level of awareness and receptivity to the singing and also decides which song or songs will work best in the situation. Usually, the singing lasts from 10 to 20 minutes. Sometimes one song is all that the person can enjoy. The songs are very short so sometimes we sing it over several times or hum it or do a little harmonizing. We have about 90 songs we draw from, but we don't require the singers to know them all.

Kathryn: How do you take care of yourself for this work?

Mattie: We focus on self-care before a sing and afterwards. If I find the singing very difficult, I write about the experience afterwards. I also have a loving supportive family and a dog and good friends who help me laugh. We share the write-ups with the other anchors. And share the joys and challenges without mentioning names. We have a person who keeps records of how many sings each of us goes out to and how many all together. I have probably sung to hundreds, maybe even thousands of people over the years. Recognizing the challenge, it is to do this work, we have designed a training manual with classes and a practicum for the singers to prepare themselves psychologically. In this work, we get immediate feedback while we are in the room by witnessing the responsiveness of the person we are serving. This work feeds my soul. As a writer, I do not get any immediate feedback as to whether my writing will eventually touch someone or not.

Kathryn: Do you need more singers?

Mattie: We don't really need any more singers, but we welcome them! We are always open to women trying the rehearsals out to see if the work speaks to them. I strongly believe that volunteerism has to serve the volunteer as well as the people served. Otherwise, it becomes a "martyrdom" activity. If a person is volunteering because they think they should, it is probably not the best way to serve. Reciprocity is important. The flow of giving and receiving adds meaning and dimension to the sharing. It is a tremendous honor to be present for such a significant time in a person's life, to be present for that journey. We are not necessary, but it can be very helpful to the person and to the family when we bring our calm, our acceptance and our love. All of this is reflected in the words of our songs.

Kathryn: It sounds like the work has evolved over time. Are there new directions you see for the future?

Mattie: Yes, our choir feels strong enough now so I and others can reach out to help our international organization, Threshold Choir, nurture the growth of other groups. I am currently on a coaching team helping a new choir in Wales get started. We connect through email and Skype. BTS also shares our training materials with other choirs.

Kathryn: Any closing message you would like to add for our readers?

Mattie: The choir has provided a spiritual outlet for me, served my need to connect with people but also with the greater Spirit. I did not anticipate this when I started. It has been a lovely surprise, something glorious in the singing or being around the music. As far as volunteering goes, I encourage people to follow their passion. Try things out. Is the opportunity going to offer you either the community or the privacy you wish for in the work? Does it have leadership potential in it if you are looking for that or is there room for you to do something simple, without a lot of responsibility and with little pressure or obligation.

Kathryn: Thank you, Mattie, and thanks to all the singers in your group for all the people you sing to and touch at deep levels.