



Parent Profile

Giving voice to her dreams

Local singing legend Jean Holden finds happiness as a teacher by Marcia Chambers

She has the soul of a singer, backed up by four decades worth of performance experience in Toledo. But it's the hundreds of children who have passed through her door in the last 25 years that reveal what is really the essence of Jean Holden — the heart of a teacher.

Jean Holden teaches children to sing. The shy, the joyful, the gifted, all find their voice in her home studio. Her professional and technical expertise, combined with an uncanny ability to delve into each child's particular needs, make her an astute and comfortable teacher. Holden is stunningly attractive; her star quality is apparent, and she could easily pass for someone 20 years younger than her 60-plus years. Her passion for her students captivates, and the earnestness for each one is evident. "I call them all my babies. I feel so blessed to do what I do. Some of my students I know only briefly and others stay for a long while, but I strive to help each one take something away that will serve them well in life."

Holden's journey from young prodigy to "Toledo's First Lady of Song" as she is regularly billed in her local performances, to a greatly admired teacher hasn't been an easy road. Her childhood was spent in Shreveport, La., where her vocal gift was evident early on. She sang throughout junior high and high school, her rich mezzo-soprano voice making her stand out early on. Her teachers recognized her potential and helped her to obtain scholarships to Dillard University and Oberlin College. Instead, Holden moved to Toledo with her mother, Margaret, and never looked back until returning for her 45th high-school reunion this year.

"I never could go back," says Holden. "I was afraid to face the people I had disappointed and the opportunities I thought I had squandered. It's a terrible thing to live with fear. So I try to teach each and every one of my students that they have nothing to be afraid of. They can be confident and sure of themselves whether they are on a stage with a microphone or going about the business of their lives. They just need to have fun with it!"

After leaving Shreveport behind in 1957, Holden quickly entered into a youthful marriage. Her early marriage, while unsuccessful, produced her two children to whom she is very close. Her son, Jerry, runs a production company, and her daughter, Lisa, is a teacher at Crissey Elementary. She is obviously proud of both, and very contented in her marriage of 24 years to Harvey Hanna, a German teacher at Woodward High School.

"I never wanted to be a performer. I wanted to teach," says Holden from her studio at her beautiful and stately Collingwood Boulevard home. "It didn't occur to me until well into my life's journey, that I could teach singing. It didn't occur to me that the two things I loved the most could provide me with a living and bring me so much joy."

During her early years in Toledo during the 1960s and 1970s, Holden's career path materialized. Struggling emotionally, she decided to get involved with local performance companies, singing with the Opera Association and at the Parkland Hotel before joining the University of Toledo performance of "HAIR" as a vocal coach in 1975. "That's when I realized that I could teach kids how to sing and perform and have confidence in themselves. That's when I realized there was something in the spirit of young people that touched me and made me want to help them."

Throughout the last 25 years, Holden has seen literally hundreds of students pass through her studio doors. Some are famous, including hometown favorite Katie Holmes and Quinn Smith, who at the age of 9 stood alone and sang "Castle on a Cloud" with the Broadway touring production of "Les Miserables." Yet it is the faces of dozens of her students, unknown to the world but beloved to her, that grace the walls of her studio. "They are all special to me. I teach them to leave their fears behind and embrace every moment of their lives."

Parents and students alike are captivated by Holden's teaching style. Toledo resident Maemee Sattler, a student at the Toledo School for the Arts, has been one of Holden's students for the last seven years, starting at the age of 8. Her father, Jim, credits Holden with helping Maemee to develop self-confidence. "Jean has an uncanny ability to discover what a child needs to overcome any obstacles in the way of developing confidence," said Sattler.

Holden works with children as young as 5, and teaches adults as well. There is a school of thought that children are too young to take voice lessons before the age of 10 or 12 because of the strain on young vocal cords. Holden says, "Kids are going to sing anyway. It's natural for children to sing joyfully. I think it's important to teach them proper technique early on so they don't strain their vocal cords."

Point Place resident Emily Gedert was in third grade when she started lessons with Holden. Emily's mother, Cindy, thinks Emily has benefited from the relationship, now in its fifth year. "Jean is so positive. She can find any child's strength and build on it. I've seen some of her students go from mediocrity to something special in only a few months." Emily, who attends GESU school in West Toledo enjoys a positive relationship with Holden. "I never feel that I've let her down. She always shows how proud she is of all her students and she always listens to what I have to say." Emily finds group performances a comfortable and positive experience. She says, "Jean doesn't play favorites to the better kids. She treats everyone special."

Holden regularly provides opportunities for her students to perform on stage, with a microphone at recitals and at events across the city. This month, Holden's students will perform holiday songs at the Art Museum in the Peristyle on Dec. 19 and 26, and will appear on WTOL's annual Holiday Moments. To prepare for the taped segment, Holden invites all her students to her home where they spend a couple of hours learning the songs they will record at the studio. Her students get to watch her in action as well. Holden still performs often as a soloist for faithful fans.

Marcia Chambers is a TAP freelance writer.

