



By Maggie Ryan, Greater Harrisburg Chorus, Region 19

You know those people who fill a room? The ones who make your head turn and your voice lower so you can breathlessly pick up the golden nuggets of wisdom they might utter? Right next to them, probably feeding them all her best material, is Marge Bailey. Without a lot of flash and glitter, but with unmatched heart and integrity, Marge has supported and enhanced Sweet Adelines International for more than 30 years. And she's done it so well, that she is the 2008 Lifetime Achievement Award recipient.

Ask Marge to list what she's done in Sweet Adelines, and she'll ask you how long a day you have. It would take more than the standard 24 hours. In the broadest of terms, Marge is an arranger, coach, judge and mentor. But look closer, and you find that she doesn't simply inhabit these roles, she defines them: former coordinator of the International Music Arrangers Program, past international president (1995-1996), certified international faculty, certified music judge, former judge specialist in music, past chair of the Education Director Committee (EDC), and certified music arranger, to name a few. That's leaving out countless years on every chapter, regional and international committee that has shaped Sweet Adelines' peerless educational status. The woman truly has done it all.

"I learned how to knit, did it for awhile, and put it down," Marge said. "I tried cross-stitching, and put it down. Female barbershop music is the one thing I've worked on all my adult life and I never get bored with it. There is always so much more to learn."

It is that insatiable appetite for knowledge and improvement that set Marge apart early. She was a little too eager for her first chapter, and they let her know.

"They literally kicked me out of the chorus," she says with a laugh. It was an inauspicious beginning that led to great things. International sent its president, Nancy Coates, to calm everyone down and Nancy saw what needed to happen. Start your own chapter, she said. So Marge did, founding the Farmington Valley Chapter in Region 1.

"I did everything in that chapter from arranger to president, but never, ever costume chair," she said. "No way they'd let me do that. Or makeup."

The more she did, the more she wanted to do, and Marge rose quickly in the administrative and musical ranks. An accountant by training and profession, her first regional role was treasurer. Meanwhile, the former music minor and gospel pianist was learning to arrange barbershop music. The chorus became her crash-test dummies.

"I'm so grateful to have had a director (Barbara West) who wanted her own arranger and a chorus that put up with it," she said. "I would bring in a piece of music and we'd sing it and find something wrong and I'd rearrange it and we'd try it again. I would go to the library, write out the changes, make a few copies, and we would cut them apart and Scotch-tape them onto the music and try them again."

Somehow, Marge's trial-and-error method took hold. Pretty soon, she was involved with Region 1's arranging program, regional board and faculty. It wasn't long before International, specifically the legendary leader, Bev Sellers, came calling.

"She was the total, absolute mentor that anyone ever had," Marge said. "In those days, she saw every piece of correspondence that went through International—every bit of it—and I would get copies of some of it with a note from her across the top, 'Marge, this is interesting,' or 'Marge, take a look at this.' Anything she thought might interest me; she thought to include me in the discussion."

It wasn't long before another Bev—then-International president Bev Miller—appointed Marge to her favorite Sweet Adelines panel, the Educational Direction Committee.

"If there is any place (you can make an impact) as a Sweet Adeline,

that's where you want to be," Marge said. "All the decisions come through there. All the (innovative programs) such as IES, the Young Women in Harmony program, the Directors Certification Program, came from the EDC. It is by far the most interesting and challenging committee to serve on."

And serve she did. Even through her terms on the International Board of Directors and as international president, Marge remained active in the EDC, serving as its chair for many years and helping to devise the vast array of tools chapters worldwide rely upon today.

If it all stopped there, that would be plenty, but Marge's most recognizable role to most Sweet Adelines might be as a judge. That job also reveals her unwavering respect for her fellow singers and competitors.

"We recognize how much time, energy and money you put in just to get (on stage)," she said. "We know you work very hard to become confident in what you're doing, and you need to feel as confident in us as judges. It's very important to us. Very, very important."

Judging, it seems, is the role Marge was always meant to play and has trained for her entire Sweet Adelines life. It requires concentration, patience, years of practice and study, a willingness to keep learning and a passion for detail. It's not something you pick up a month before contest season. Judges practice all the time, reviewing, studying and networking with their fellow judges.

"Every contest becomes an opportunity to trust your gut," she said. "You're so in there when you're in the pit, so focused. You put down what you hear."

Even Sweet Adelines International's top judges are judged by a select group known as judge specialists, and Marge has been one of those, too. There is a specialist for each of the four categories. Every single contest in every region is reviewed, from the accuracy of the scoring and the judges' comments on the scoresheets, to how the event was run. If a contestant asks a judge a question, it goes all the way up the chain to the judge specialists. Each letter and e-mail is reviewed, and so are the replies.

"We feel—the judge specialists, the International Board and the EDC—that the integrity of the organization rests upon the integrity of the judging program," Marge said.

What words in Sweet Adelines are more scrutinized and interpreted than

mal conversation, and these gems just fall out."

Today, Marge has scaled back some of her International commitments, although she still seems to be in every pit of every contest and she says she and Dale Syverson are planning the

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judges' comments? Every competitor looks for the meaning behind the phrase, and sometimes they look too hard.

"I once had a question from a chorus about a comment I'd written," Marge chuckled. "I'd said that the 'chorus seemed to sag' near the middle of a song. They wrote and asked if I could tell them who was sagging, because they were very concerned about how that looked."

That little nugget unmasks the true magic behind Marge Bailey's longevity and affection within Sweet Adelines—her impish, often accidental, sense of humor.

"Marge is the queen of the malapropism," International President Peggy Gram told an audience in Hawaii. "For instance, one time as the chair of a regional judging panel she announced that the 'Brigadier General Chorus' had won the contest. It was the Bridger Mountain Chorus."

Former International president Carole Kirkpatrick can be brought quickly to tears of laughter recalling some of Marge's greatest hits. Among her favorites:

"What do I look like, chopped leather?" and "She made me so mad, I wanted to slap her on the back of the face."

Carole calls Marge one of the funniest people in the world, but swears she doesn't know it.

"Her brain works so fast her mouth can't keep up," Carole said. "It can be a nor-

2011 Director Seminar/Judge Training/Arranger Workshop unlike any that's been seen before. Though she calls arranging her favorite part of her barbershop life, she says now she's more of a fixer-upper. Coaching and teaching have replaced many of her administrative roles.

"Coaching is one of the most fulfilling things you can do; making people better at what they love to do," she said. "No one is more eager to learn than barbershop singers. They are consumed with being good at this. They cannot stay away."

Ask Marge how she juggled all her jobs, as well as her long marriage to Al and the three children they have raised, and she will direct her praise to the Sweet Adelines International staff and members she's met along the way. In a lifetime of giving selflessly to improve the organization, Marge is most proud of the everyday people who have welcomed her into their lives.

"I think of the people who put up with me staying in their homes and put up with my foolishness," she said. "That's one of the things I really treasure, all of the people who have been wonderful to me that I never would have met without Sweet Adelines."

This Lifetime Achievement Award stops Marge in her tracks.

"I still get all choked up about it," she said. "I'm so humbled; it is so surprising that I've done anything worthy of this award. All this time I've been having fun. I had all the fun and still got all the accolades." 