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RAISE EVERY VOICE

LIFELONG LOVE OF MUSIC AND LOVE OF TEACHING PRODUCE SONGS WITH CLASS

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"I believe in my new day that's dawning/ And the promises that lie there for me/Deep within there's a knowing that someday/I'll be all I've dreamed I can be."

Joyce Randolph, English teacher, sang those lyrics from her composition, "My New Day," last year at Santa Teresa High School graduation ceremonies. The students were so moved that they gave her a standing ovation.

By student demand, she'll sing them again at this year's graduation exercises June 15. But this time, the lyrics apply to her as well -- now Joyce Randolph, English teacher and recording artist.

Randolph, 46, got to this point by a somewhat eccentric route: a musical education funded by an anonymous benefactor, a classroom career in her minor -- not major -- field, a sister's request for business help that turned into an artistic project, and a third husband -- found through a classified ad -- who led her back to the church and the discovery of roots she'd never known.

It makes me want to warn, "Kids, don't try this at home." But as we sit in her San Jose living room, sipping perfectly prepared English tea and munching on home-made scones with clotted cream, she puts the pieces of her life together for me and it sounds as though all this was meant to be.

"I was born in Stockton," says Randolph, the third of four children. Her father was a mason for the city and her mother worked as a nurse. "They always stressed education. My daddy always said, 'C's are for average people; if you want to be average, that's what you get.'"

"My music started early," she continues. "There was always piano. My parents paid the \$1 a week for my lessons. I started playing the violin in about the third grade, and a mysterious benefactor paid for private lessons all the way through elementary school. When I got into high school, the same person paid for me to study at the music conservatory at University of Pacific."

It wasn't until her high school graduation ceremonies that she met the man who had supported her musically: Stockton business executive and philanthropist Skipper Yee. "He had seen this little child with a violin and quietly supported my music study all that time," Randolph marvels. "At 17, you don't realize and fully appreciate, but as I reflect and look back . . ." Her voice trails off. "My parents could never have afforded to have me study privately. Out of the blue."

Voices of inspiration

She studied music at Stanford University, graduating in 1971, married and taught as a vocal music specialist in the Menlo Park schools for a couple of years. Her first marriage didn't last, but she remarried and, after taking time off to have a child, prepared to update her resume and resume teaching.

"I love Shakespearean plays -- I'd always taken some sort of literature along with my music -- and I learned I had enough credits for a minor in English so they added that to my teaching credential," she says. Agreeing to teach drama got her foot in the door at San Jose's East Side Union High School District in 1977, but it is English -- award-winning classes taught mainly to senior students -- that has occupied her time there since.

The second marriage also was unsuccessful, and Randolph was a single parent for eight years. "But I thought, I'm most happy when I'm married," she says, so in 1987 she placed a classified ad in the Mercury News: "38-year-old woman with degree. Have my own home. Good cook. I just need to be married."

"It was the best \$108 I ever charged," Randolph says, laughing. "When the mail came, my girlfriends and I got some champagne and went through it. There were lots of replies. Some from Elmwood (Correctional Facility) -- 'Baby, I don't have no house but I have love.' Toss that. But there was one reply, so simple I saved the letter: 'I am a widower, with a 14-year-old daughter. I own my own home. I have been on my job for 24 years.' And he left his telephone number. She called the writer, research chemist Barney Randolph, and they talked for four hours. "He laughed roundly," she says. They've been laughing roundly together ever since.

He also encouraged her to attend church with him. She had attended the predominantly white Christian Church with her parents in Stockton, but had stopped going when she left home, and says the mostly black environment of San Jose's Antioch Baptist Church was an eye-opener. "The first time I sang there, the minister of music said, 'You sound white.' " She laughs. "I was mortified. I had to learn to sing black -- the progressions I'd heard on Sarah Vaughan records growing up. I'd missed the experience of the black church. That kind of voice I'd never sung before, so every song was a new world for me. I'd never known what was inside me. That's why I tell my students today, 'You never know what's in store.' "

Collection of lyrics

She had written lyrics for years, though, snatches of songs on scraps of paper tucked away and never performed. "I was always reticent about singing. Even now, I don't sing in the home. At church or at a performance, I'll sing with all my heart. But at home? (Singing) is just -- I don't know -- very revealing."

A sister, entrepreneur Linda Stockdale, knew of her songwriting, and asked Randolph to compose something inspirational for a product she was introducing. Randolph wrote "My New Day," and that set in motion the process that would introduce her singing to a wider public. Seeking an arranger for the song, Randolph was introduced to John Turk, music director for Glide Memorial Church in San Francisco. He heard her sing, and suggested she cut a demonstration tape. Did she have any other songs?

"I came home and cranked out a rhythm-and-blues song, 'You'll Know Who I Am When I'm Gone,' " Randolph says. "He kind of liked that so he asked me to write more. Each song I wrote required me to come from a different place in my heart. Really, it just ended up for me as a tableau of my life. It was therapeutic, cathartic. It was a wonderful midlife activity."

And it had grown to more than a demo-tape project. "My husband, in his quiet, unassuming way, said, 'Joyce, I think you should do a CD. There's money I've set aside from the stock market. Twenty years from now, if you haven't tried everything you could, you'll kick yourself.' "

First production

Turk agreed. "He'd played on albums, but he'd never produced one," she notes. They worked on the songs at her home. "He'd sit with a glass of Merlot -- that was our writing muse -- and hear my rinky-dink chordal progressions. Then he'd go to the piano -- he'd heard the arrangements in his head -- and just do marvelous things." Eventually, Randolph and Turk came up with 10 original songs -- blues to ballads, funky to romantic -- and in tribute to her teaching background added a Turk arrangement of an 11th for the album: the Sammy Cahn-Gene DePaul pop hit, "Teach Me Tonight."

Randolph formed her own company, Myrlys Music, to copyright her songs and give her artistic control of their recording. With Turk calling on musician friends from such groups as Tower of Power and Con Funk Shun to sit in, they recorded the CD at Darstan Records in Los Altos, had it mastered at Rocket Lab in San Francisco and sent it off for national distribution by Gunsmoke Records in Atlanta. It's due out next month with an initial pressing of 50,000.

The album takes its title, "I Send Him Roses," from a song written as a tribute to Randolph's husband. It's also an accurate description of their relationship. "I do send him flowers," she explains. "He has been the most marvelous, supportive person."

She also credits her Room 309 Santa Teresa students in the liner notes for critiquing her work. "They begged to hear some songs," she says, "and after I'd play one they'd say, 'Oh, that's tight, Mrs. Randolph.' I'd say, 'Tight? Is that good?' They'd say, 'That's a dope song!' I'd say, 'Is that good?' I act very 'Our Miss Brooks' with them."

She chuckles. This is one hip Miss Brooks. Her students know it. Her teaching peers, who praise the respect she gets from her students and the respectful way she teaches them, know it. Her teacher's elocution not only makes every word of her recorded lyrics understandable but also gives her a commanding presence in the classroom that students admire. "Daddy always said, 'You don't mumble,' " she explains. "Mama always said, 'You don't slump -- walk with pride.' "

Full throttle

Randolph is both proud and grateful for reaching this point in her life. "I never thought my life would be anything like this," she marvels. "At a time when my last child is leaving the nest (daughter Taryn is a Stanford freshman; son Tadd, a Morehouse College graduate, teaches in Oakland), I thought I'd be grieving. But I'm going full throttle. Teaching full-time at Santa Teresa. Teaching 15 piano students at home. Producing the CD. Caring for my mother (her widowed mother lives with the Randolphs).

"My life is really buoyant," Randolph continues. "There have been periods of hard work and sweet sacrifice -- coming home, putting the rubber chicken in the oven, zipping to the studio, coming back trying to grade the essays, stumbling into class -- 'And now back to "King Lear," class' -- but now it's like grown-folks Disneyland. It's just incredibly good."

She pauses, teacup in hand, and says, earnestly and happily, "If I don't live another day, I've had my share of fun and enough for two other folks. I laugh a lot. If I don't make money (with the songwriting or recording), I like my job. If I drop off, then just open the casket, put on the CD and party me to glory!" As she sings in "My New Day," "I stake my claim on this new day before me/There's no mountain, no hill I can't climb/I can feel in my heart, oh so clearly/That the sky and its limits are mine."
Graduation time.

IF YOU'RE INTERESTED

Information on ordering "I Send Him Roses" (\$15 CD, \$10 cassette) is available by writing Myrlys Music, Box 54038, San Jose, Calif. 95154; by telephone (408) 723-7480 or fax (408) 448-2615.