



The Family Business

By Sarah Joyner
Photos by Doug Strickland/Chattanooga Times Free Press



The Chattanooga Singers were rehearsing the national anthem, standing in a circle with Glenn Draper directing from the eye of their vocal hurricane.

"I remember thinking we were sounding good," says Sandy Delonga.

But Draper, former director of choral activities at UT Chattanooga, stopped the song halfway through, then asked someone to turn off the lights. As the singers stood in darkness, he spoke of sacrifice and American freedom, of the honor to live in a country for which so many had fought and died.

His passionate speech grew with intensity as he described the circumstances behind the poem that would later become lyrics for the national anthem, written by Francis Scott Key, who was inspired by the final moments of the War of 1812.

The room stood silent as Draper subtly cued the music to start. "We sang it again with the lights still off, and by the end of the song, there wasn't a dry eye in the room," Delonga says.



Glenn Draper directs UT Chattanooga singers.

WORLDWIDE RENOWN

Known for his big smile, vigorous handshake and pulpit-like presence, Draper came to the University of Chattanooga in 1968, the year before it transitioned into the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga. At this crucial time, he founded the choral ensembles—Chamber Singers, Singing Mocs and the Chattanooga Singers; both the Chamber Singers and the Chattanooga Singers are still around today. He was a pioneer in the national show-choir movement, which combines choral versions of popular songs with choreography.

During his career, he led 49 international concert tours and countless American tours, presenting his ensembles before multiple heads of state, including American presidents and British royalty. He directed his performers in prestigious locations such as New York City's Carnegie Hall and the Sydney Opera House in Australia.

Today, at the age of 90, Draper lives in Signal Mountain. His current state of health did not permit him to comment for this story.

"It was never just about the music. It was about serving the message of the music."

—Sandy Delonga

Andrea Lyons (Chattanooga '90, '18) was a freshman the first time she made the "tour list" to travel to England with the Chattanooga Singers. But her excitement was quickly replaced with worry. How would she pay for an overseas trip? She admitted to Draper that she didn't think she could afford the tour. She never forgot Draper's response: "Don't worry about it."

"I'm pretty sure I wasn't the only one having financial difficulties," Lyons says.

She paid what she could. An anonymous donor paid the rest.



Glenn Draper with years of memories at his office in 2016.

MUSICAL FAMILY

During his more than 30-year career, Draper cultivated the musicality of his students, and many would sustain fruitful careers as performers and teachers of music. Across the U.S. and around the globe, his students and supporters are a community that has stepped onto stages, into recording booths and inside classrooms. Draper didn't just facilitate their success; he created a family.

Delonga is part of that family. The voice for recognizable brands like Coca-Cola, Macy's, Hallmark and Starbucks, to name a few, her credits include successful stints as a performer with Warner Bros. and Disney Live! in Australia, as well as performances and stateside tours with Atlanta's Theater of the Stars. Her 20-year career as a performer was often guided by a set of rules she learned as a student of Draper, she says.



Glenn Draper, center, seated, with the Chattanooga Singers.

"First, engage your mind. Focus on the technicalities with exceptional attention to detail. Work hard to ensure that nothing gets in the way of the message—not an off-pitch note, mispronounced word or misplaced level of emotional intensity," she says.

"With that solidly in place, bring your heart to the table and simply feel. Authentic connection to both the message and your listeners will follow. And then you have created something that truly moves people."

Gail Dooley (Chattanooga '77) has taught music for almost 40 years and says there's one specific trait of Draper's that she always tried to emulate.

"Have you heard that expression that students won't care about what you have to teach them until they know how much you care about them?" Dooley says. "I think this is where Draper excels. You know without a doubt that he cares about you as a musician and as a person."

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