

Diana Leland - Past National President



Inspiration from our Greatest Generation
An Interview with
Minnesota Choral Director Diana J. Leland



Diana directing the Edina HS Varsity Choir in 2005 at her retirement concert

Diana J. Leland has experienced an amazing 35-year career in choral music of which 31 years occurred in Minnesota. In 1965, Diana enrolled as an undergraduate student at Valparaiso University, Valparaiso, Indiana, where she received her Bachelor of Music Education degree in vocal and instrumental music in 1969.

Her first teaching job (1969-70) was at Marshall Junior High School in Janesville, Wisconsin, where she taught choral music. Due to her expertise as an oboist, she also instructed all the double reed students in the Janesville school district.

Diana enrolled as a graduate student from 1970-71 at the University of Wisconsin-Platteville, was a graduate assistant for the music department and earned a Master of Science in Teaching degree in May 1971. She was very involved as an oboist in the wind ensemble, university orchestra and several small woodwind ensembles. During the summer of 1971, Diana traveled to Europe (for the very first time) with the UW-Platteville Wind Ensemble, where they visited 10 countries during a six-week concert tour.

From 1971-74, Diana taught choral music at Woodrow Wilson Junior High in Manitowoc, Wisconsin. In the fall of 1974, she accepted a choral music teaching position in Edina, Minnesota, at Edina West Lower Division and directed the Edina Chorale at Edina West Upper Division. From 1975-1980, Diana continued teaching choirs at Edina West and started the Edina West Varsity Choir, due to increased student enrollment in the choral music program.

During 1980-83, Diana was engaged as the first full-time General Manager for the Dale Warland Singers. Edina Schools granted Diana a 3-year leave of absence to serve in this position. While working for the Dale Warland Singers, Diana wrote arts grants which increased the budget for marketing the Singers' local, regional and national profile and building new audiences, as well as creating their first Twin Cities concert series.



Valley View Jr High - Edina, SSA Ensemble in the 1990's

Diana returned to Edina Schools in 1983 and taught choral music (grades 7-9) at Valley View Junior High/Middle School until 1999. While at Valley View, she served as the Edina's District Music Coordinator (1990-95) and as the Applied Arts Area Leader (1995-99). In 1999, Diana accepted a choral music position at Edina High School. From 1999-2005, she directed the Edina HS Varsity Choir, as well as serving as the Teaching and Learning Specialist for Music, Visual Arts and Theater, which required mentoring untenured teachers plus reviewing and updating curriculum. Diana retired from Edina Schools in June 2005.

Diana served as ACDA-MN state president (1979-81), ACDA North Central regional president (1984-86) and ACDA national president (1989-91). Her tenure as an ACDA leader also included chairing a national (1989) and regional conference (1988), plus serving as the Advertising Editor for the North Central region's *Melisma* publication from 2005-2010.



Diana Leland ACDA-MN President at State Conference

St. Olaf College, November, 1979

In addition, she was a member of the International Federation for Choral Music's international board from 1989-1993 and 1996-2002. From 1998-2002, Diana served as the Secretary and board member for the Sixth World Symposium on Choral Music, which was held in Minneapolis during August 2002. She has attended all eleven World Symposia on Choral Music from 1987-2017.

Diana served as a member of the F. Melius Christiansen (FMC) Endowment Fund Committee in 1996-97 and again from 2005-2015. From 2008-15, she was engaged as the part-time Director of Development for the FMC Endowment Fund Committee.

Since 2008, Diana has been employed as a Group Tour Specialist with Accolades Tours for the Arts, a travel company based in Minneapolis, Minnesota, which arranges international travel for music ensembles.

Diana's special recognitions include:

- The 1997 Ashland Inc. Teacher Achievement Award
- The 2003 F. Melius Christiansen Lifetime Achievement Award
- The 2008 Weston H. Noble Lifetime Achievement Award in the Choral Art
- 2009 Distinguished Alumni Achievement Awards from both the University of Wisconsin-Platteville and Valparaiso University

Diana loves getting together with her family and friends, entertaining, gardening, attending concerts, traveling and photography. She is an avid Minnesota Twins follower and a life-long Green Bay Packers fan.

Please share some of your musical experiences during your early years.

Since my grandfather was a pastor, I sang my first solo on Christmas Eve in his church when I was 2.5 years old. My grandmother was the organist at the church, so she taught me how to play the piano. I frequently accompanied the school choirs during my junior high and high school years. Music was a major part of my life while growing up on a Wisconsin dairy farm. I also studied organ while I was in high school and became the organist at my grandfather's church. When I was in sixth grade, I started playing the oboe and that continued for many years after attending graduate school. I also learned how to play the accordion when I was 10 years old, which was a most enjoyable and unique experience.



Diana accompanying the Edina HS Men's Chorus with her accordion on KALINKA with tenor soloist David Henderson

When did you first decide to become a choral director?

My grandmother had always hoped to be a music teacher. Grandma was my biggest cheerleader in becoming a music teacher, as she often said that because she never earned a music degree, she hoped that I would live out her personal dream and become a choral director.

When I was in high school, I had a choir/band director (Sam Slaman) who was a first-year teacher from VanderCook College of

Music. Mr. Slaman greatly influenced and encouraged me to become a music teacher. He set the bar high and expected excellence daily! While at Valparaiso University during my undergrad days, I majored in both vocal and instrumental music. Because there were many more sopranos than oboists, I played oboe in the Wind Ensemble and Orchestra, but also sang in the Choir. The Wind Ensemble and Choir both toured annually at the same time, so I always played oboe and traveled with the Wind Ensemble. My dream was to become a band director. However, at that time (late 1960's and early 1970's) there were very few woman band directors, so I modified my goal. When I interviewed for my first teaching position, I was hired as a junior high choir director and double reed specialist in Janesville, Wisconsin.

Please share some memories from your first several years as a choral director.

My first teaching position in Janesville was rather unique. There were two other choir directors, and myself. We did lots of team teaching, so I never really felt as if I was in fully in charge of the choirs. As a result, I decided to become a full-time graduate student during 1970-71. My second full-time teaching position was at a junior high in Manitowoc, Wisconsin. I loved teaching choir to grades 7-9, and I started a select ensemble comprised of ninth grade singers. It was a challenge to keep all students engaged. Looking back, I only wish I had known then what I know now about teaching junior high choral music. After three years in Manitowoc, I accepted a job in Edina, Minnesota, that required teaching choral music to grades 7-12. Edina's choral music program was not very strong at that time (1974), so all concerts presented featured both the Edina Upper and Lower Division Choirs in grades 7-12.

What was your first annual salary?

My first annual teaching salary was \$6,700. Believe it or not, my monthly take-home pay was \$399. Everything cost so much less than today. Gas was \$.23 per gallon and making a long-distance phone call was rare! I felt very fortunate to have a full-time teaching job in 1969-70.

What were some of the ideas you implemented to build or recruit students into your choral program?

While teaching in Manitowoc, the Select Ensemble presented a 20-minute concert at all the feeder elementary schools in the spring. That project really helped recruit 7th grade singers for the following year.

In Edina, we had a 6-period day, so if a student was in band or orchestra they could not sing in a choir. Edina also offered 5 foreign languages at the junior high level, so choosing choir as an elective was rare. I started SA and TB ensembles for anyone who wished to sing. They rehearsed from 6:30-7:30 AM before the school day began, so I had rehearsals at that time, three times per week. Each week, one singer was assigned in each of the ensembles to bring bagels or donuts and juice, which the singers enjoyed prior to each rehearsal. It worked beautifully, and attendance was not a problem at that early hour! When Edina changed from being a junior high to a middle school, we finally implemented an 8-period day. Students were now able to participate in both choir and instrumental music as an elective. That major change greatly increased the numbers in Edina's choral music program.

What are some of the highlights of your 32-year teaching career?

I was fortunate to teach in three school districts (Janesville, Manitowoc and Edina) where music and the choral art were highly valued. High student interest and incredible parental support made a significant difference in the success of those choral music programs.

While teaching in Edina, I taught junior/high middle school choir for 22 years. I loved working with singers in grades 7-9 and directed many excellent choirs. My students frequently auditioned for state, regional and national ACDA honor choirs. In 1993, when the national conference was held in San Antonio, eight of my 8th grade students were chosen for the ACDA National Junior High Honor Choir, which was conducted by Minnesota conductor, Dr. Anton Armstrong. As an added feature, Dr. André Thomas was commissioned to write and accompany "I Hear America Singing" for that national honor choir!



1993 National Jr High Honor Choir students from Valley View Jr High -Edina with Anton Armstrong & Andre Thomas
When I retired from Edina Schools in 2005, the Edina HS Vocal Music Boosters commissioned a choral composition from Bradley Ellingboe, in my honor. The Edina HS Concert Choir sang the multiple movement composition, titled "For Only a Short Time" (A Choral Suite), at the final concert of my teaching tenure with the composer present. I was totally surprised and had no idea that this was happening. The words, music and choir's performance moved me to tears. Wow, I was so very humbled and honored!



Commissioned composer, Brad Ellingboe with Diana and EHS Concert Choir director, David Henderson in 2005
While serving as Edina's music coordinator, Edina Public Schools music program K-12 was selected by the Minnesota Music Educators Association to receive its Class AA Exemplary Music Award in 1998. In 2005, the Edina HS music department was presented with a GRAMMY Signature School Award, which was a special personal send-off as I began my retirement.

Which choirs and choral conductors inspired you early in your career?

- Mr. Sam Slaman, Brookwood High School
- Dr. Larry Fleming, Valparaiso University

- Dr. Karle Erickson, Lawrence University
- Dr. Kenneth Jennings, St. Olaf College
- Alice T. Larsen, St. Olaf College
- Weston Noble, Luther College
- Dr. Dale Warland, Macalester College and the Dale Warland Singers
- Eric Ericson, Swedish Radio Choir and the Stockholm Chamber Choir
- Norman Luboff, the Norman Luboff Choir

My working as the General Manager for the Dale Warland Singers (1980-83) and Dale Warland positively changed and impacted my life very significantly. Dale personally introduced me to Robert Shaw, Eric Ericson, Norman Luboff, Roger Wagner, Margaret Hawkins and Margaret Hillis. What a gift that was to me and my career!



Robert Shaw and Dale Warland with Diana at her home, January 1994

Dale Warland also taught me how to strive for and achieve the highest standards, excellent writing and editing skills and what it means to be tenacious and reach for one's fondest goals.

You played a key role in ACDA-MN's early development. Why and how did you first become involved with ACDA? What offices did you hold?

I was not an ACDA member while I taught in Wisconsin. After moving to Minnesota, I joined ACDA, in 1975, while attending a Gregg Smith summer choral workshop, hosted by Dr. Morris Hayes at the UW-Eau Claire, when George Berglund, who was serving as ACDA-MN's Star of the North editor, gave me a membership form. A whole new world of choral music with fabulous choirs and incredible conductors was introduced to me when I joined ACDA-MN.

I became officially involved with ACDA-MN in 1976 when I agreed to serve as the Assistant Chairperson for the 1978 North Central ACDA Conference, which was held in Minneapolis. Early in 1979, I was asked to serve as President of ACDA-MN, because elections were not yet held in Minnesota. As the incoming President of ACDA-MN, I attended the very first ACDA National Leadership Retreat in Lawton, Oklahoma during June 1979. It was a fabulous gathering and changed my life dramatically, and I gained much information which guided me in my new role as President of ACDA-MN. I also met many choral directors at the retreat from throughout the U.S. who became not only colleagues but dear friends.

From 1984-86, I served as the President of ACDA's North Central Region. It involved lots of communication via telephone and snail mail letters with the region's six state presidents and presidents-elect. We did not have email, cell phones or social media during that time!

In 1987, I was elected as ACDA's National President-Elect. I was the very first junior high choral director, chosen to serve in this position, who was not a collegiate choral director. I chaired the 1989 national conference in Louisville, Kentucky while President-Elect. From 1989-91, I served as ACDA's National President. Successfully authoring and submitting a grant application, in 1987, to the National Endowment for the Arts, which funded a first-time ever salary for the editor of the Choral Journal, was one of my initiatives. Currently, as a National Past President, I continue to serve as a member of the Past Presidents' Advisory Council.

What were some of the most memorable performances you've witnessed at an ACDA event?

The most memorable ACDA performance for me was the Dale Warland Singers singing Dominick Argento's 'I Hate and I Love?' at the 1987 ACDA national conference in San Antonio. It absolutely brought the audience to its feet!

In addition, other special ACDA performances were:

- The Aeolians from Oakwood University, conducted by Jason Max Ferdinand, were absolutely phenomenal at the 2019 ACDA national conference in Kansas City
- Helmuth Rilling conducting J. S. Bach's Mass in b-minor with the Oregon Bach Festival Chorus and Orchestra at the 1991 ACDA national conference in Phoenix
- The Estonian Men's Chorus singing 'America the Beautiful?' with the audience at the 1989 ACDA national conference in Louisville, Kentucky Note: There was not a dry eye in the house as everyone joined in the singing, and the Estonians waved American flags at the end of the concert.

As a member and leader in ACDA-MN since 1975, what was the state of the organization like during those early years?

When I became involved with ACDA-MN, all meetings were hosted and held at member's homes. All communication was conducted via the US Mail prior to and between three state board meetings. We rarely made long-distance phone calls, because they cost too much.

During my term as ACDA-MN President-Elect, Wayne Kivell, Vern Opheim and I authored the very first ACDA-MN state by-laws. Thus began the process of electing officers by ballot for our state organization. Prior to 1979, all ACDA-MN officers and district chairs had simply been appointed.

I have a copy of the ACDA-MN budget from 1979-80, which was the first year I served as state president. It is printed in purple ditto format! The annual budget was \$2,850 that year, which included an expense item for printing three issues of the Star of the North.

ACDA-MN was experiencing the 'growing pains' of achieving and maintaining a potentially strong state choral organization during my presidency from 1979-81. The creation of ACDA-MN by-laws early in 1979 greatly assisted and guided the organization in becoming more professional.

The ACDA-MN state conference at St. Olaf College in November 1979, broke all previous records with 178 registrants. In November 1980, the state conference at St. Cloud State University, featured Dr. Howard Swan as its headliner, and had 206 members in attendance, including 15 members from out-of-state.

Looking back, what were some of the key turning points in our history while you were an ACDA-MN officer?

Hosting the 1978 ten-state ACDA North Central Regional Conference in Minneapolis greatly increased ACDA-MN's membership.

The creation of ACDA-MN by-laws in 1979 made a significant difference in how the organization was managed.

In October 1979, ACDA-MN's Star of the North changed from mimeographed format to a professional magazine publication that was offset press, which included advertising being sold to partially pay for the cost of the newsletter. That issue had its first photographs and was mailed to over 4,300 choral musicians throughout Minnesota, which was designed to increase the state's membership.

In 1993, ACDA-MN moved from non-affiliate status with ACDA national and became an independent affiliated state, which allowed us to oversee our own budget and finances without control from national ACDA. That move was extremely critical to ACDA-MN becoming what it is today!

Who were the key leaders in ACDA-MN along the way?

ACDA-MN has been blessed with many great leaders. Curtis Hansen was one of the original seven founding members who started ACDA in 1959 in Kansas City. Murrae Freng always offered a guiding hand to ACDA-MN and shared much wise advice and expertise. Chet Sommers served for three years as ACDA-MN's president prior to my becoming president. He was always so very encouraging and totally selfless. Bruce Becker has been and continues to be a guiding light and visionary for ACDA-MN.

Those who have served ACDA-MN and other special people who personally influenced me while I was an ACDA officer were:

Dale Warland, Robert Peterson, Elwood Johnson, Roger Tenney, Richard Edstrom, Jan Gilbertson, Karle Erickson, Carl Lipke, Paul

Brandvik, Wayne Kivell, Lauretta Graetz, Gloria Corbin, Steve Boehlke, Katherine Doepke and Geneva Eschweiler.

I really hesitate to list names of ACDA members, as everyone who has ever served on the board or been a dedicated member has assisted me and made a big difference in our state. I will be forever grateful for everyone's service, support and continued encouragement.

Without the benefits of today's digital age, how did ACDA-MN communicate with its members?

The most important component for ACDA-MN's communication (prior to the digital age) was its newsletter, the Star of the North. It's difficult to imagine, before the Internet existed, that there was no ACDA-MN website, Facebook page, Daily Beat or Weekly Pulse. However, ACDA-MN's membership continued to grow because of the many opportunities and vast array of choral activities that our organization offered its members.

You served on the FMC Endowment Fund committee for eleven years. Please comment on your service and the importance of the FMC Endowment Fund for ACDA-MN's future.

I served on the planning committee for the 125th Celebration Concerts of F. Melius Christiansen's birth anniversary, which were held in November 1996 at St. Olaf College. During that time, I was also selected to be a member of the initial FMC Endowment Fund committee. Following the huge success of the 125th anniversary concerts, the FMC Endowment Fund committee met frequently in 1997 to set up the parameters of the FMC Endowment Fund. Because their meetings were held at 12 noon, they asked that I take a leave from the committee, until I was retired, because I could not attend meetings during the day.

Upon my retirement from teaching in 2005, I once again joined the FMC Endowment Fund Committee. Along with Bruce Becker, I served as the Co-Coordinator for the F. Melius Christiansen 135th Anniversary Concert Celebration held in November 2006, at Orchestra Hall in Minneapolis. Following those concerts, I coordinated and successfully conducted a matching gift campaign (during 2006-07) that generated a \$100,000 contribution from the Wenger Foundation.

From 2008-2015, I served as the very first part-time Director of Development for ACDA-MN. The endowment fund grew from \$486,000 in 2008 to nearly \$731,000 in 2015. This only happened because corporations, foundations and ACDA-MN members and friends have continued to generously support the endowment fund with their annual contributions. Thank you!

Since the inception of the FMC Endowment Fund, 470 Minnesota choral directors, student conductors and students of ACDA-MN members have been the recipients of nearly \$261,325 in scholarship awards. What a legacy ACDA-MN has established! The goal of the Endowment Fund committee has always been to ensure a vibrant future for choral music in the state of Minnesota.

The 150th anniversary concert celebration of F. Melius Christiansen's birth in November 2021, will be vital to the FMC Endowment Fund's continued legacy. ACDA-MN is very unique and fortunate to financially sustain an endowment fund which offers many scholarships to its members, student conductors and ACDA-MN members' students.

Volunteerism at all levels has been vital to the growth of ACDA-MN. How relevant is it for our future?

ACDA-MN is very dependent on volunteers. It's really important that our members continue to volunteer and become involved in the 'workings' of the organization. Please consider volunteering to run for an ACDA-MN office or to assist with honor choir auditions, honor choir programs, Summer Dialogue, state conference offerings and our state newsletter. Once you volunteer, it will become very clear and apparent as to how your assistance becomes a personal commitment and dedication to ACDA and its mission of promoting and maintaining excellent choral music today and well into the future.

What advice or words of wisdom do you wish to share with young and emerging choral directors who are entering the field today?

Today's young and emerging choral directors are extremely well-prepared. The knowledge, high energy level and infectious enthusiasm they exhibit for the choral art is truly gratifying and commendable and bodes well for ACDA's future.

While observing the younger generation of choral directors actively involved at state, regional and national ACDA conferences, it's apparent and very reassuring that they are extremely well-versed in vocal pedagogy, historical and new choral methods and techniques, and very knowledgeable about excellent choral repertoire. When I attend ACDA conferences, I've noted that a majority of the choral repertoire performed presently is that of contemporary composers. I love hearing all this 'new' choral music, but today's young and emerging conductors must not forget to also program and expose their students to established 'warhorse' literature and choral music of master composers from the past.

You have an incredible and awesome responsibility to become career master teachers who are not only excellent musicians but also sensitive and effective communicators.

Remember to keep standards and expectations high for your choirs!

Maintain your ACDA membership always! Attend ACDA conferences at the state, regional and national level, whenever possible.

Volunteer for ACDA whenever you can!

Remember to always say, "thank you." Too often we neglect to show gratitude to those who have made a difference.

Looking back, what has been the value and impact of ACDA upon your professional career?

ACDA has been at the core of my choral music career. Because of my exposure to excellent choral repertoire at ACDA conferences, my choirs always sang fine literature. ACDA also taught me to always keep the standards and expectations for my singers very high and to never settle for second-best. My motto for teaching choir was: Good, better, best; never let it rest. Until the good is better and the better best! I am extremely grateful that ACDA guided and assisted me with being the person, leader and teacher that I am today.

Other reflections or comments:

As a 44-year life member of ACDA, I have been very blessed. I served ACDA for 39 years as a volunteer and during that time I was actively involved as an ACDA officer for 16 consecutive years from 1979-1995. In ACDA I have found unspeakable joy, wisdom, education, commitment, compassion, security and friendship - all the building blocks of our choral profession. Yes, ACDA truly is a way of life for me!



Diana, Weston Noble and Bruce Becker

Weston Noble received the very first Weston Noble Lifetime Achievement Award
Rapid City, SD in 1994

Having grown up on a Wisconsin dairy farm, I learned very early in life about a strong work ethic. As a result, I've always stepped up to volunteer when something needs to be done. Dedication and commitment have always been part of my being. Enthusiasm is also a key component to living a happy and productive life.

The hundreds of dear friends and colleagues, whom I have met through choral music, have significantly enhanced and impacted the quality of my life. I will be forever grateful for the many fabulous opportunities that I have been afforded through our choral music profession.

Mere words are not adequate to express my deep gratitude and appreciation to all of you who have offered your support, encouragement and assistance while I served as an ACDA officer. I am deeply humbled and honored to have been a part of ACDA-MN for so many years. It has greatly enriched my life both personally and professionally. I've been very blessed to serve ACDA and the choral art.

In closing, I'd like to share with you with you what I wrote in my final President's Comments in the May 1991, Choral Journal. I quote George Bernard Shaw, "I want to be thoroughly used up when I die, because the harder I work, the more I live. I rejoice in life for its own sake. Life is no 'brief candle' to me. It is a sort of splendid torch which I have got hold of for the moment, and I want to make it burn as brightly as possible before handing it on to future generations."

May ACDA's torch continue to burn brightly for many more years!