

What's Your Story – JFS – May 2020 – submission for “Make Your Mark” theme

By the age of 22, I'd started expressing myself by writing music. Always in tune with my emotions – when I couldn't share them with anyone else, I found a way to “get them out” in a song. The lyrics reflected things that were going on in my life – particularly about men (or should I use the term “boys”?)

Though music has always been a part of my life, writing music started after hitchhiking across country by myself in 1971. (I would say that was an emotional reaction to a relationship gone sour!)

After all these years, the experiences are fresh in my mind, just as if they were yesterday. However, the emotions are no longer the same. Somewhere along the line, I found that staying true to my convictions, business/social ethics, and creative thought processes, made me very peaceful – despite my emotional ups and downs with others. Those things have stabilized me into a very productive “older adult”, and I don't intend to give that up any time soon!

If I could have a conversation with my 22-year-old self, I would tell “Me”, that romantic relationships have a place and balance in life, but they are not the be-all, end-all of life. That is not to diminish the positives of building relationships, navigating them through ups and downs, feeling the joy of physical and emotional connection. However, without “romance”, there are still so many things that give us emotional satisfaction and reward. I would also tell “Me” never to give up, to keep believing in my crazy ideas, and continue exploring. There are so many experiences yet to enjoy.

Knowing my 22-year-old-self, who was kind and loving (and didn't mind old people at all), I think she would have given the current “Me” similar advice! Keep believing in your crazy ideas. Keep trying. Do what you can do, with what you have available.

I am a person who is more likely to listen to the advice of someone who's actually experienced what I was experiencing – or who has a different view than mine based on their own experience. Often advice comes from second or third hand information – like a story or article or someone who could be known as an “expert” because they are famous. I don't know those people personally, so I am less likely to listen to that remote advice over taking interest in stories from those I have met in person, who've been there and done that. I have always been fascinated with how people think, react, and process challenges. The best advice I think I have ever had was from my Dad, who would prompt me with questions to reason and solve my own challenges instead of telling me what to do. This was “indirect” advice, but it still serves me (as long as I listen to myself).

As I have moved into various work positions and entrepreneurial situations, there have been a number of great business mentors. I cannot pin down a specific “best” advice. I readily ask for advice when I am out of my realm, and understand where to look for answers as needed. Instead of “advice”, I would say it is those who light the way to possibilities that prompt me to find more of them in my own mind.

I can't think of a “worst advice”. I am very selective about information I allow to influence me. One to question things and decide what has merit, the only “bad” advice I have gotten is advice I've given myself when I was not thinking straight! I take full responsibility.

A “hidden” talent is difficult to define! If it's “hidden”, I probably have not found it yet! Everyone has some talent. “Talent” is relative. We can't judge our talents using other people's terms. We have to see our own

value and make that work for us. It's what we do with it, or how we feel about it, that makes the difference in our own lives. If we are lucky, we also get to share those talents with others in ways that inspire and bring joy.

Primarily, I have always been musical and creative. I like to look at both sides of a problem, and come up with umpteen possibilities and solutions. My mind continually races with ideas, questions, and answers.

I have been singing all my life, taught myself guitar at 15, and how to use piano to accompany myself at 20. I never aspired to be a star. The biggest "talent" I recognize in myself is understanding how to sort/prioritize information, use what I know, find the joy, push myself to learn more/practice, then translate all that into income. I have spent many years earning income as a vocalist/musician. That's taken me on different journeys – from bars, restaurants, and hotels to singing telegrams, and senior/healthcare music programs.

I have earned income creating artistically as well. I call myself a "functional" artist. Aside from the joy of any challenge (like assembling a jigsaw puzzle), my creative solutions usually have a practical component. For instance, I am less likely to paint something to look at. I am more likely to assemble something one can use.

When my daughter was little, I crafted a 2 story wooden house for her many Barbie dolls. Strong enough for her to lean in, there was a garage for the Barbie car, bunk beds, sofa, refrigerator (that opened & closed with racks inside), a stove (with doors, racks, & "O-ring" burners) lamps, etc., all using scraps of wood, fabric, whatever was available. I wallpapered the various room walls paper from wallpaper sample books. I once built a huge chess set for a master chessman who worked in the automotive business, using repurposed diesel lifters, nuts/bolts, candy wrappers, and plexiglass! I've sewn clothes from scratch at times.

In general, I am proud that I have been able to get through a number of life challenges, creatively, and intact. Learning a variety of skills (instead of focusing on one specific trade) has allowed me flexibility to make changes as needed. Never much of a follower, I take responsibility for choices I make – whether they worked out successfully, or not.

No regrets! Every experience has a place in life. They give us lessons to learn, or challenges to grow from. I can't think of anything I've wanted to do that I didn't do! Anything I stopped myself from was because I held myself back. That would be my own fault – nobody else's. Though there are plenty of things I haven't experienced and places I have never been, I don't have any burning desires or feel like I am missing out. I have no "bucket list", nor desire to create one.

Friendships are very important to me, but I haven't had a "best" friend since high school. I treat each relationship on its own merit. Everyone has something interesting to share, endearing quirks, challenging annoyances, and habits (good/bad). There is something of value in every person. I look for that value in others - try to encourage and compliment. When meeting people, and developing any kind of relationship, I find the positives, and try to accept the differences.

It was never my style to follow the "in" crowd. When I was younger, that isolated me, but with those who allowed a connection, we found mutual commonalities to begin with – whether a creative spark, love of dogs, intellect, or even being the odd one out. This desire to find connectors, actually became a boon later, when marketing myself for jobs, and within job tasks including public relations, outside sales, and market research interviewing. I even acquired a love of "cold-calling", because I learned how to make the connection before and within the conversations. (Then the call took a warm tone!)

Those we can't have relationships with, are those that don't reciprocate the same acceptance and respect.

I've never had any huge "world" aspirations. My biggest focus has been to stay comfortable and happy in my own skin.

Like some now famous creatives – perhaps I will make my mark on the world after my demise! I am writing a book about "Staying Inspired" to help others recognize the arsenal of traits and tools within, and decide when to use those traits/tools to counter life's roadblocks.

Somewhere down the road, we have all touched someone – purposefully, or unexpectedly – in ways that matter. We may never know the exact impact of that. If we all can be considerate, loving, look for good, comfort others, be joyful, and spread joy – the effect and impact will be there. Though we all like to be recognized for the good we do, I feel satisfied knowing somewhere down the line, at least one person will have benefitted from me being on this earth. (At the end, I have asked my family to honor my desire to be useful to others. I am a designated donor.)

Some of my favorite memories are about times spent with older adults.

My great grandmother (Mom's side) was always gentle and accepting. She just made us feel good! Quiet calm voice, telling Russian fairytales, her fingers tickling the palm of our hands in a sweet little game. Great Grandma was an amazing seamstress. She'd take one of my dolls, and return it with a hand-sewn, intricate wedding gown. When we visited her apartment, we'd sort through and play with her button collection. She was diabetic, and had to give herself injections. I remember watching her do that once. It was fascinating to me, and seemed very natural.

My grandmother (Dad's side), used to remind me to "sing out" – gesturing to open my mouth wide and let the music out. It's funny, that I don't remember her singing. I suppose she must have participated during family gathering sing-alongs. (My dad, aunt, & uncles were all great singers. That must have come from somewhere!) Later, she developed memory problems. I remember riding my bike over to her apartment to visit her. My parents said she'd taken to baking cakes and storing/hiding them in weird locations. She was just my grandma to me – and nothing had changed.

I was comfortable visiting each of them as they declined physically/mentally, and eventually moved into supportive facilities. My Dad & I would sometimes sing together or bring gifts to share in these environments.

My grandma (Mom's side) eventually lived with us. As she experience renal failure, my own mother learned how to do dialysis at home. I was already off to college, but did come home to take Grandma to outside dialysis when Mom & Dad were traveling.

Dad was my favorite person. He understood me, kept us playing and singing together as a family. In his early 60s, he was diagnosed with metastatic skin melanoma (survivor of prior eye melanoma when I was 16). At the time of that later diagnosis, I was a single mother, living nearby. I accompanied him to doctor appointments, and he asked me if I would take the responsibility of making the final call to "let him go" when it was time. He was able to manage most of his own self-care, but emotionally I was there for him. The last two weeks of his life, I took on a lot more responsibilities. That he trusted me with the tasks was the most heartwarming and loving acceptance I have ever felt. When it was time to let him go, I bravely did what he asked.

It's no wonder, with my creative skills, and comfort in medical sciences, I was an aide to a registered occupational therapist in high school, and went on to study occupational therapy in college. However, life and music interfered and pulled me in a totally different direction. After 3 years in my OT curriculum, I took a break for a single trimester. When I was ready to resume, there was a 3 year WAIT to finish my OT classes. Instead of finishing that curriculum, I opted to complete my bachelors with a major in psychology and minor in art! Then, I went off to sing my heart out. Go figure!

When I later became a single parent, music was not a good career option to manage with a young child – especially considering late nights in nightclub work. Her dad left the picture when she was a year and half old. It seemed appropriate to stop performing for a while, and move back to my hometown for parental support (Detroit MI).

In the Detroit area, I got a “real” job. (I use that term affectionately and a little sarcastically, because in those days, our elders did not take careers in the arts too seriously unless we started out as creative prodigies.)

The first “real” job was doing outside sales/PR for a transmission shop. From there, I became an independent entrepreneur doing outside sales/PR as a group program with multiple automotive related businesses that needed someone to help them get business referrals.

When Dad died, I moved to Raleigh, NC. Mom and my sister were in the area at that time. My daughter was only 9.

In my next “real” job, I worked for the State of NC, doing Disability Determination work for the Social Security Administration. What goes around, comes around. My medical comfort level and knowledge made this a fascinating and exiting job, at which I excelled until my early retirement at age 62. During the years at the DDS, I used my mechanical and creative thought processes to recognize information, put the details together logically, and create non-arguable legal rationales to make a Disability Determination. This gained some recognition from SSA's Disability Quality Branches. On retirement, I'd earned a Regional Commissioner's Award for my service to the people of NC and the agency.

Why did I retire early? When my daughter was 16, she asked me to put on a holiday music performance at the coffee shop where she worked. By then, I'd acquired some musical equipment in the house – though I was doing nothing but entertaining myself with it. She had found her own beautiful voice, and was performing & competing through high school. I said “yes” and did that with her. Then we started a family tradition of annual performances like that. We continue that tradition, even now that she (and I) are all grown up! This first performance was within the first 10 years at the Disability job. However, I forgot how excited and alive I felt when singing! At the agency, I had a little outlet as the musical presentation “go to” for retirements, promotions, and birthday programs. I participated in some employee talent shows in the workplace too.

I needed to do something with music to refresh my soul. Not desiring the late night life, someone suggested senior music programs. (Thinking about it, that was probably the best specific advice I've ever received.) Since then, I have been playing and singing in the senior and health care industry. At first, I kept the performances to after work and weekend hours. More and more often, I would receive requests to perform during my work hours. I juggled for a while, but finally gave in, retiring from the state job with almost 20 years of employment, and went back to full time music.

Now, I occasionally help someone with Disability claims as an outsider, just to keep those skills active. So far, I have been successful at helping each person get benefits!

Mainly, since I left my job at the end of 2013, I have been a regular and frequent performer at senior communities and health care facilities all over the Triangle and into the Triad. I still take on parties, weddings, and get many requests for singing telegrams too! In the healthcare field, I am around patients/clients, and caregivers all the time. Bringing music to everyone is enjoyable for me – because I just love to sing. It's also helpful and enjoyable for everyone in the community/facility. The residents/patients may be at various stages of mental/physical health. Some are independent and other are dependent on caregivers. From the resident/patient standpoint, the live music is a change from the normal routine. The songs bring back memories, or trigger emotions in the memory-impaired. Some will sing along. Some will move to the music. Some accept the stimulation internally, gaining whatever they can, whether it works to reduce blood pressure readings, or to revisit the past in their minds. The music performances give family caregivers something to enjoy with their older/more limited loved ones, a break from traditional conversations about medicines and care. The music brings expression out in those who buried it. I've had caregivers approach me and tell me their loved one hadn't talked in 2 years, but suddenly started talking as a result of a performance. For the medical and activities team, the music programs give staff a reprieve to catch up on other tasks, while their charges are otherwise occupied.

I have observed both positives and negatives in the senior and healthcare environment. This takes me to the very last piece of the current equation. My mother, still alive and in fairly good condition at the age of 92, had found more need for assistance since her second husband passed ~ 2007. My current husband and I are the only ones left in the Raleigh area to assist. So, I am now the primary care-giver (or help-mate), for my mother when she needs something. My experience with the senior communities as a performer gave me a wealth of knowledge. Therefore, when it was time for Mom to think about giving up her own home for a little more protected - but social - environment, I was able to steer her to some great choices in local independent living communities. She chose her favorite, sold her house, moved in, and did not look back! Most of her needs are met within the community, however, there have been some hospitalizations and aftercare events that required more hands on assistance. More and more she relies on us to help her navigate issues with banking, bills, shopping, technology, and comfort. My sister and brother are able to give input from a distance. Now, Mom is still fairly independent, so, I see my job more as an advocate than caregiver. We continue to encourage her independence, challenging her to embrace technology, assist as needed – without taking over. We are watching her and watching out for her. So far, she is doing well. When questions arise about her decisions for herself, I consult with my sister in particular (a social worker). So far, we haven't needed to take away her independence (or her car – yes – she is still driving).

With the current Covid19 restrictions, we are not allowed to visit Mom in person. However, we can drop things off for her comfort (wave from the other side of the door), call her on the phone, send e-mails, and we did facilitate a family Zoom call through the community for her birthday. Having to stay in and not socialize is getting really boring for Mom, but she is managing with great spirits.

One day – maybe not too far in the future – it could be my husband and I that need care. He has a wonderful attitude and respect for his elders. Hopefully, our collective children will rise to the challenge if ever needed. However, it is my hope and desire not to ever have to impose that responsibility on our children! When I was a kid, Mom used to challenge, “One day you will have to take care of me!” It seemed so unlikely at the time. We were similar emotionally, but very different in our rationalization and thought processes. I don't know that she ever really expected it would happen. Still, here we are! I hope we have raised our own children to

be caring and desirous of helping others – and us – when the time comes. I’ve seen evidence of that, and have faith everything will work itself out. My solution? I will go before that happens. (I have already written a song about what to do when I have to go away.)

In the meantime, I am keeping myself productive. During Covid19 restrictions, my senior and healthcare performances are on hold. I have resumed singing telegrams with some modification. They are now “Socially Distanced Singing Telegrams”. I continue to write, work on motivational presentations, mentor/assist others, volunteer (remotely right now), organize, cook, take walks outside.... Possibilities are everywhere!

Paula Chafetz Snyder (1951 “Baby Boomer”)



*Paula C Snyder - May 11, 2020 post
“Socially Distanced Singing Telegram”*