

Women Who Say Yes to the Spark

A story series by Angie Thompson

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Joy in Every Note: Susan Mueller's Life in Harmony

*A voice shaped by faith, a spark passed through song.***A Legacy Rooted in the Dust Bowl**

Susan Mueller's story begins in Stillwater, Oklahoma, where her father, Glenn Epperley, carried a dream that seemed improbable during the Dust Bowl years. The son of itinerant farmers, Glenn pursued a degree in vocal music and built a life teaching others to sing.

"I know it had to be a God thing," Susan reflects. "My daddy had been given a voice and he was determined to use it. Sacred music shaped his life, and he passed that love to us."

That legacy took root in all three of Glenn's children. Her brother Cecil excelled in basketball before a career in banking. Her brother Barry became a conductor of the U.S. Army Chorus and later founded Tulsa's Signature Symphony. For Susan, music was the same inheritance—a spark waiting to be fanned into flame.

The Spark Becomes Her Own

At six, Susan began piano lessons in Stillwater. Her teacher, Margaret Nichols, affirmed

her gift: "The music wasn't just technical with her. It was part of her soul."

When the family moved to Bartlesville in 1969, Susan's spark deepened under choir director Noel "Mr. K" Kaiser. "He gave me opportunities," she recalled. "Not gushy praise, but trust and expectation that said, you can do more, and you should."

She laughs at her senior piano recital. "It wasn't a disaster, but it confirmed what I already knew. I was a teacher, not a performer." What mattered were the doors others opened for her—opportunities she later gave her own students.

Seeing the Spark in Others

As a teacher and conductor, Susan became known for spotting potential in voices others overlooked. She remembers two boys who worked tirelessly—one with limited range, another drawn to choir for a college application. Both sacrificed lunch hours for daily coaching. Both made all-state or all-district choir—



Susan Mueller

not from talent alone, but from desire.

"It's not always the best voice you notice—it's the hunger. The desire tells you there's a spark worth tending."

The same was true for girls who began incredibly shy, barely raising their voices above a whisper. Performance became their bridge to confidence. "I am thinking of one student. She was so quiet, but through singing and musical theater, she became a leader in the jazz choir. The transformation was remarkable."

Music in the Midst of Tragedy

April 19, 1995, marked the

“Music can hold a community steady when words alone are not enough.”

bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City. Susan was teaching high school choir when the news broke. That day, she gathered her students and led them in *In Solemn Silence*—a memorial anthem with words of mourning and hope: “*Forget not those who have died without shelter from the cruel bombing and slaughter, children doomed to silence forever.*”

Within days, Susan joined the Bartlesville Chorale for a scheduled performance of Verdi’s *Requiem* at the University of Missouri–Kansas City under Dr. Eph Ehly.

The stage was massive—over a hundred voices, a full orchestra, and the booming percussion that anchored everything. As the choir reached the *Dies irae* (“*Day of wrath, that day*”), Susan stood in the soprano section just feet from the bass drums. Each resonant strike shook the hall, vibrations rolling through her chest. The silences between drumbeats hung heavy, like the grief blanketing Oklahoma.

“What had been just words and notes a few days earlier suddenly became spiritual,” she recalled. “It felt like Verdi had written it for that exact moment.”

For Susan, music has always been both personal and spiritual. And in that performance, she sensed it

wasn’t just her. “I believe every person in that hall felt it,” she said. “That pounding drum, those words of judgment and hope—it was unforgettable.”

The Dual Role & A Season of Lasts

Susan’s influence stretched well beyond the high school classroom. For decades, she also conducted the Bartlesville Chorale—a volunteer ensemble that became a cultural cornerstone of the city. “The Chorale was different,” she said. “It wasn’t about grades or contests—it was about belonging. Doctors, teachers, retirees, young professionals—we all became one voice.”

Her final year of teaching was filled with milestones. It was her last group of high school students making all-state and excelling at contests. And it was



Susan’s last day of teaching before retirement. “Doing what I love.”

also her last time conducting the Bartlesville Chorale in Handel’s *Messiah*—a goodbye to a community of voices she had nurtured for years.

A Final Hallelujah

On a Sunday afternoon, the Bartlesville Chorale gathered for Handel’s *Messiah*—and for Susan Mueller, it was her final time to lift the baton.

The hall was filled with family, friends, former students, and fellow singers. Her two sons sang beside her husband, while familiar faces from decades of music looked back at her. “Looking into the faces of those who had carried this community choir for decades brought me full circle,” she reflected.

The Chorale has always been more than music. It has been a place where differences disappear—where every background, age, and experience blends into one shared sound. For one newcomer to Bartlesville, it even became the place where he found belonging in a new city.

When the voices rose in *For Unto Us a Child Is Born*, Susan heard more than counterpoint and harmony—she heard her life’s work woven into every note. And as the *Hallelujah Chorus* swelled, the room stood in gratitude. Trumpets rang,

timpani thundered, and the choir's voices soared.

It wasn't just Handel's chorus.

It was Susan's hallelujah—echoing through every singer she had ever led.

Joy in Every Note

Now retired, Susan still sings in her church choir and with the Bartlesville Chorale under new leadership. She practices organ and piano faithfully, volunteers in her church, and still mentors when she can. "The music itself still inspires me daily," she said. "Sacred music connects me to my faith—I can't live without it."

"If my story had one word, it would be joy.
Pure joy." – Susan Mueller

Looking back, she knows her life has been shaped not only by music, but by the people it gathered around her: students who found their voices, colleagues who shared her fire, audiences who left changed.

Her spark carries forward—through family, faith, and community—and lingers in every singer who once stood before her baton, every friend who felt encouraged to try,

every life touched by a note of grace. Joy in Every Note is not just the title of her story. It is her legacy.

This abbreviated version is a companion to the full-length story, available at AngieThompsonConsulting.com/stories.



Did You Know:

Singing in choruses remains one of the most popular performing-arts activities in the U.S. More than 54 million Americans participate today. Research shows that choral singers report feeling less lonely (73%), more socially connected, more optimistic, and resilient, compared to the general population. The benefits extend beyond personal well-being. Chorus participants tend to be more civically engaged—they volunteer more, contribute financially to causes they support, and even vote at higher rates than average citizens (*National Endowment for the Arts*).

Learn more about the Bartlesville Chorale at www.bartlesvillechorale.org.

About Susan Mueller

Susan Mueller, Hall of Fame music educator and longtime conductor of the Bartlesville Chorale, has spent her life shaping voices and building community through music. A graduate of Oklahoma State University and Southern Methodist University, she taught for 25 years in public schools and later at Oral Roberts University and Bartlesville Wesleyan College. Inducted into the Oklahoma Music Education Association Hall of Fame in 2008, Susan continues to inspire through her church music ministry, community service, and mentoring of young musicians.

About the Writer and Permissions

I'm Angie Thompson—a fundraising strategist, storyteller, and consultant who believes words and images can spark transformation. For over 40 years, I've partnered with nonprofits, small businesses, and purpose-driven individuals to help them move beyond generic messaging into clear, compelling communication that inspires action. My work as a writer, composer, and brand consultant has earned awards in film, television, and philanthropy, and continues to fuel my passion for stories that build connection and change lives.



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Disclaimer

The narrative presented in this story is based on personal interviews and the reflections of Susan Mueller. The views and memories shared are her own and are included with permission. This feature is intended to celebrate her life and influence through music as part of the Women with a Spark series.