

This evening it is my honor to present the Carrel Pray Music Educator of the Year Award to two people who are amazing musicians, thoughtful educators, wonderful humans...and to two people who just so happen to be totally and completely in love.

The award, named in honor of the founder of the Madison Boychoir, Carrel Pray, is presented annually to a teacher who has made a significant contribution to music education in our region or has been especially supportive of MYC and its programs.

This year's recipients, Leotha and Tamera Stanley, have certainly made significant contributions to music education in our region through their more than 50 years (!) of music-making and teaching.

Both had musical childhoods - Leotha's mother bought a piano for their house when he was just 5 years old; as his sisters started taking piano lessons, he started figuring out notes on the piano on his own, learning *Heat Wave* by Martha and the Vandellas. Tamera remembers going to church every Sunday with her parents - her father played lead guitar and sang in a quartet that rehearsed in their basement. She would listen to the multi-part singing and harmonize along with them from her listening perch upstairs!

Leotha and Tamera have both had lives committed to church music. At just 12 years old, Tamera began conducting her home church's choir. She spent years working at Christian Academy in Milwaukee, coordinating Christmas and Easter programs. Leotha continued with music through his time at UW-Madison - even though he was a track star, he also found time to found the UW Gospel Choir, even coordinating one trip between track meets and choir performances!

Both of them studied education, but not music in any formal way - music was a part of their lives from childhood to today, through working with mentors, singing and leading in church, and playing, in Leotha's case, from a young age at an area funeral home.

Leotha's many years working as an artist-in-residence in area schools has brought him great joy. It started small - with just one residency at Glendale Elementary, for which he wrote his song "Be a Friend." One school became two, then four, then many, many more...and he wrote more and more songs to teach to kids. Seeing the kind of growth in kids during his time with them - from initial meetings to concerts to recording sessions - has been a source of pride and inspiration for him.

Tamera has this to say about working with children in music: "Younger children - their minds are so open to receiving. It's like opening up a crackerjack box and seeing the prize inside -

with kids you're helping to open them up to something they probably have never done before, or didn't know they can even do - to help them find their voice."

To see them together is to see two incredible musicians and teachers joined by love of music, their faith, and each other. Hearing them both describe (each from a different point of view) their meeting, falling in love - it's like a scene right out of a rom-com of the best kind. Their connection - the kind that allows each one to lead when required, follow when needed, and meld their musical minds together - is something very, very special. Any MYC singer who has worked with them over the years has seen and understood this immediately.

We've worked together on the MSO Christmas concerts for the past nineteen years - always a highlight of our MYC season.

But it's not just me that thinks they are incredible teachers - here's what some more people have to say about Leotha and Tamera:

From their friend, Debbie Biddle (who is president of the MYArts board and owner of the People Company):

Leotha and Tamera have encouraged, taught, and led thousands of children, young adults, and adults throughout Wisconsin and beyond. They are true treasures, not only for their remarkable musical talents and abilities but for the infectious joy of the faith they carry, their deep love for people of all ages, and their unwavering commitment to serving others.

From world renowned UW professor of education (and friend), Dr. Gloria Ladson- Billings:

Leotha and Tamera Stanley are not just musicians, they are MUSIC. The joy they share in making music and making everyone around them a part of that music is magical. Their contributions to the Madison and state of Wisconsin music scene are immeasurable. It is hard to imagine this community without them. We are all enriched because of their generosity.

From Heather Thorpe, choir director at Verona High School:

My students and I have always been greeted with open arms and infectious smiles by the Stanleys. Any time I call them to ask, "Can you stop by sometime and listen to the music kids, talk with the choir students?" You name it, they are there. They see greatness in all students. They immediately celebrate them, ask about them, and encourage them to keep music in their lives.

I often will receive texts from Leotha saying "I just met one of your students. They are great. Thanks for your work." Just recently, Tamera came to work with some VAHS choir students. My students said, "Wow, she is so nice. I love her energy. She makes me want to be a better person and singer." Being a better person encompasses who the Stanleys are. They want what

is best for everyone in their community and they send this message to everyone through the power of music and connection to each other.

From long-time bassist at Mt. Zion and COO at Black Girl Ventures, Vanessa McDowell:

When I was in elementary school "Uncle Lee," as I affectionately call him, came to my school, Orchard Ridge Elementary, to teach us some songs that he wrote and he called me up to sing a solo. Twenty years later, "Uncle Lee" leans over to me and points at a woman across the room and says 'that is going to be my wife one day.' In walks Tammy and the two became one.

Thirty-five years later, we are all a part of the music ministry at Mt. Zion Baptist Church where I get to play the bass in the church band under the direction of Lee and Tammy every Sunday and occasionally they ask me to sing a solo. They are an unforgettable couple that has built a tremendous legacy

And from Leotha's daughter, a musician and music teacher, Letrice Stanley:

About Tamera: A light that makes the world so much brighter. The tonic to our family key, she brings balance to every space she occupies. Her passion and compassion feel like the perfect crescendo in your favorite aria. She brings an order, a plan, and an ease, like a well written score. Her collaboration with Maestro Lee is a resounding harmony!

And Letrice says about her father: We all know music is a language and an expression. It is on the piano that I've seen and felt my dad express himself the most. Growing up, One of my favorite memories was overhearing him play the piano and getting lost in the music before church on Sundays. Maestro Lee has left an impact on generations of people and children where he has expressed his God given gift in churches, schools, arenas, parks, halls, theaters, for banquets, weddings, funerals, services, celebrations, for the community, for the culture, for the generations before and for future, for you and especially for me!!

And you can walk down the street in Madison and find so many more people who know and love Leotha and Tamera. Please join me in welcoming this year's MYC Carrel Pray Music Educators of the Year, Leotha and Tamera Stanley.