

Vitamin L News

Spring 2011

The Great Gift of Behind-the-Scenes Service to Vitamin L!

Chances are that if you're taking the time to read this article you have some level of interest in Vitamin L. The Vitamin L that the public sees is a lovely group of talented youth singing uplifting songs with my husband, Vitamin L's songwriter, Jan Nigro. What the public does not see are some precious gems—dedicated volunteers who give their time and expertise behind the scenes to support Vitamin L's mission on our advisory board.

In this issue of *The Vitamin L News* I'd like to recognize five volunteers who have devoted many years of meaningful service to Vitamin L. They've actively kept our organization going, ensuring that our chorus members continue to have a truly unique performance and leadership opportunity—and that our Vitamin L messages keep reaching thousands of youth yearly in our concert audiences.



Chuck Geisler joined our board in 2002. He immediately started working on creating greater parent involvement in our organization by forming working committees of volunteers. He also served on our strategic planning committee and helped Vitamin L set several five-year goals for 2003-2008. In addition, Chuck helped plan and secure sponsorship for our 20th birthday year events and then devoted his leadership to our board responsibility committee. I always felt that Chuck was looking out for me and that has been so reassuring. Chuck has been a calming and grounding presence on the board.

Robin Dubovi joined the board in 2003 and concurrently served as our representative on the Center for Religion, Ethics, and Social Policy (CRESP) board, which was a requirement at that time. For six years, she was not just doing this "double duty" for Vitamin L, but she was in effect doing quadruple duty by also serving on either our family committee, fundraising committee, or board responsibility committee, as well as on additional committees for CRESP (now CTA, the Center for Transformative Action). Robin has also participated actively in board and leadership training activities and workshops, adding further value to her many roles on the board. She has been wholly committed to her Vitamin L volunteer work for many years, always bringing a smile, a positive outlook, and valuable ideas.



Alice Wu has served actively and enthusiastically on our advisory board since 2004. As a member of our education committee, she created curricula to be used in six-week after-school Vitamin L enrichment program classes. She then organized and implemented these programs multiple times at three Ithaca elementary schools, using our chorus members to teach the classes—which was a complicated task! Additionally, Alice has served as the adult board member liaison to our youth board members, supporting our "buddy" system to help create community among Vitamin L members. Most recently Alice worked with others on pairing Vitamin L songs with customized lessons plans for Ithaca's Martin Luther King Community Build.

Lisa Wood's board service began in 2005, and she has contributed valuable skills in all aspects of our communications and operations. She has helped plan and write our newsletters and fundraising appeals—and has been an editor extraordinaire! She has served actively on our fundraising committee, as board secretary and keeper of official board documents, and as a reliable and thoughtful advisor on all sorts of issues as they've arisen. Lisa also helped visualize and make plans for our 20th birthday year events. Her accessibility and willingness to listen and advise, no matter how small or big the topic, has been a true gift.



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A Vitamin L Parent's Perspective... Finding Healing and Empowerment Through the Vitamin L Experience

I raised my daughter as a single parent. As a bi-racial student, she had positive pre-school and elementary experiences in Syracuse in settings that were culturally diverse and supportive for the children and families.

That changed when we moved to the Cortland area when Brittainy was in 7th grade, a time of emotional crisis and significant developmental changes for many young people. From the start, Brittainy faced difficult challenges fitting in with her peer group and feeling supported by school officials.

Almost from her first week in public school, she experienced bullying and teasing, and was targeted by one young girl in particular who was relentless in pursuing Brittainy. As it is today for many families, getting support from school officials proved challenging, and we were met with extreme resistance and denial.

In her middle school Brittainy was teased and bullied and made fun of by the kids because she looked different. There were only two other students of color in her entire middle school. As a parent who has dedicated her life to working with those most at risk, I began to realize, to my dismay, that my own daughter was part of an at-risk group.

I had to do something or find something that could give her the confidence and even more importantly the sense of self worth that she so

desperately needed. Brittainy loved to sing and had a beautiful voice, and we heard about this group in Ithaca called Vitamin L. We learned that she would be required to audition for the group. I contacted Janice and arranged an audition for Brittainy. Because her confidence had been shattered by bullying, teasing, and a lack of recognition for her talents at her new school, Brittainy was reluctant to try out. But she overcame her nervousness, went through with the audition, and was invited to join.

This event was a turning point in her life. It saved her spirit and her soul. On so many levels, she was embraced by an organization that taught about acceptance, self-love, tolerance, anti-bogtry and inclusion through music. The obligation and responsibility to live the lyrics she sang for young children in schools everywhere influenced her in profound ways and played a significant role in the young adult she has become.

I cried at every single concert I attended. In part this was because of the message of the music and the effect on the audiences Vitamin L performed for--but mostly it was because Vitamin L really saved Brittainy's life. She made friends and had a tangible impact on the young children in each audience. In the faces of many of them she saw the suffering she herself had endured.

She felt the transformative power of giving back; the experience of being



part of the group was empowering and healing at the same time.

Brittainy is now 25. She attended and graduated from Wells College. She is currently an independent and professional young woman working for Indian Health Services in Maryland, an organization that tends to American Indians who are at risk and in need of health care. She is passionate about giving back and justice for all. Finally, she is dedicated to beginning graduate work in the near future. She has often said what a positive impact Vitamin L had on her and her life.

Thank you, Vitamin L, for making a difference in many children's lives.

- Susan Cortilet-Jones, MS, LMHC, specializing with helping individuals on the Autism spectrum.

The Great Gift of Behind-the-Scenes Service to Vitamin L! - continued



Linda Hoffmann joined the board in 2007. She officially served three years, putting in so many hours of volunteer time that it was as if she did six years of service in three. Linda brought to Vitamin L her professional background in fundraising and development. She provided outstanding leadership as board chair and led our group through the process of creating by-laws, making what could have been a very dry process a lot of fun. She led (and fed!) our fundraising committee, putting in countless hours of grant research, planning events, attending training workshops, and more. Linda continues to volunteer actively for Vitamin L, most recently helping us procure funding for an upcoming recording project that Vitamin L will be doing in connection with the Martin Luther King Community Build.

This has been just a brief introduction to the ways in which these advisory board members have served Vitamin L. It is by no means an all-inclusive accounting of their contributions and the depth and breadth of their commitment. Nonetheless, I welcome this opportunity to recognize their years of devotion, their leadership, and their service—and to express Jan's and my heartfelt thanks for all they have done for Vitamin L.

—Janice Nigro, Director

“Express Yourself!”

How Vitamin L Inspired One Performer To Choose A Courageous Path

When I was a little girl, the one day of the school year I looked forward to the most was when Vitamin L did a concert at my school. I thought that the kids in Vitamin L were the most incredible people I had ever met. It wasn't until I was older and joined the group that I realized how much of an impact Vitamin L had on my life.

When I started high school, I was really involved in music, singing with Vitamin and auditioning for the high school musical. As my freshman year ended, I started rethinking where my niche in school and in the community really was, and I had a realization about my dream job.

Since I was four, I have been heavily involved in a martial art called Tae Kwon Do, and I received my first black belt at the age of nine. I hoped to incorporate my martial arts skills into a future career. That summer I discovered a way to use my martial art skills in an exciting, intriguing, and incredible way. I started focusing all of my academic and physical energy into one day applying to be a member of the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

During my sophomore year I read and watched everything I could

about the necessary steps to become an FBI agent. I learned that the FBI looks for people with a background in service, such as military, police, or fire. I consulted a family friend, who told me my local fire department was interviewing for new recruits. I was a bit wary about fire-fighting but decided to interview. To my disbelief, I was accepted and started training every week as a probationary member of the fire department. During my months of “probie” training, my love and drive for fire-fighting flourished, and I felt I had found a new purpose for what I could do for my community, and for myself. Almost a year later, I have just about finished my interior training and hope to continue training so that when I am 18 I am fully able and prepared to enter a real fire atmosphere, not just a training burn.

As I think about what I do, I can't help but notice how different my interests are – I love to sing – and yet martial arts and fire fighting are a major part of my life. And I understand how Vitamin L has helped me make diverse choices without worrying what others think. In every Vitamin L concert, we are teaching children that they can do what they love and be who they want to be. I truly believe that without

these lessons that Vitamin L provided, and shared with me when I was just a little girl, I would not be pursuing my love of fire-fighting—and my goal of being in the FBI. Without Vitamin L's messages, I may not have found the courage to step out of the box and go against the norm for many teenagers. For these lessons, I am forever grateful to Vitamin L, and the incredible messages that we send to children.

- Adele O'Rourke,
Junior, Ithaca High School



Please inquire about joining our advisory board!

Why? I've been on the board for a few years and can say it's a very rewarding and fun commitment. Once a month a vibrant and eclectic group of people meets to discuss core matters and to give valuable advice and support to Director Janice Nigro.

Now is a very exciting time to be involved, as Vitamin L is building for the future with new programs and broader outreach. Several new openings on the advisory board will be available this summer as part of our ongoing member rotation. Take advantage of this opportunity to contribute your diverse background and skills to this great organization – we hope to fill vacancies by this fall. For more information, contact Chuck Geisler at ccg2@cornell.edu (607/ 539-7082) or me.

The Vitamin L Project has earned accolades from President Obama, the U.S. Congress, state and local leaders, and—most important—thousands of school children throughout this region and beyond. Come join our “backstage” efforts!

– Glenn Allen glenn@damianiwinecellars.com 607/227-9587

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Thank You!**

Want to work behind the scenes with Vitamin L?

The Vitamin L Advisory Board is looking for new members to help support our organization. For more information, see page 3.



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