



Photo by Michael Meador

Current members and alumni take the Hangar Theater stage in one of two concerts held on August 7, 2004 to celebrate VL's 15th birthday.

## Vitamin L Celebrates 15<sup>th</sup> Year

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The Vitamin L Project is a non-profit Project of CRESP (Center for Religion, Ethics and Social Policy at Cornell University).

We welcome tax-deductible donations to help further Vitamin L's work.

August 2004 marked the completion of 15 years of Vitamin L! To mark the occasion, Vitamin L had a joint birthday celebration with Ithaca's Hangar Theater, which was celebrating its 30th birthday.

What a wonderful celebration! Vitamin L performed 2 energizing, lovely concerts to enthusiastic audiences at the Hangar Theater, served birthday cake to hundreds, and held a creative, birthday themed raffle of great prizes generously donated by 26 local businesses and entertainers.

It was a magical day. Our regular concerts have nine chorus members on stage. For some songs at this special birthday concert, we had over 60 Vitamin L chorus members and three alumni on stage, singing together with lots of spirit. The performances were uplifting and joyful. This was a memorable event that

was great to share with our community.

We have great appreciation for the commitment, the industriousness and the beautiful spirit of giving on the part of numerous parent and advisory board volunteers who helped make this event happen. Special thanks also go to our local sponsors of the event: Cayuga Family Medicine, Alternatives Federal Credit Union, Wegmans, Eagle Broadcasting and Shortstop Deli.

Dear friends of Vitamin L,  
We invite you to enjoy reports about Vitamin L's 15th birthday party, Yolanda King's visit with Vitamin L, and more.

Happy fall!

- Jan & Janice Nigro



Photo by Janice Nigro

Yolanda King, center, with some of the members of Vitamin L who shared a Sunday afternoon with her.

## Yolanda King Enthralls VL

“...what an absolutely precious, precious gift you are sharing with young people...”

Vitamin L received a very special blessing on August 29, when Yolanda King, the daughter of the late Martin Luther King, Jr., graciously gave of her time at an inspiring, enriching, question and answer session with Vitamin L chorus members and their families. This was such a special opportunity to hear Yolanda's unique perspective as she spoke eloquently from the heart on several topics, including joyful childhood memories of her father.

Yolanda is an internationally known motivational speaker and actress who travels the world giving theatrical presentations and lecture performances. Her personal mission in life is to inspire positive social change and world peace. She was in Ithaca as a guest actor rehearsing for Cornell University's first play of the season, *A Raisin in the Sun*. Vitamin L member Cameron

Younger was cast as Yolanda's grandson in the play. I was thrilled and filled with gratitude when she accepted an invitation to meet with Vitamin L on her one day off from rehearsals.

Yolanda also attended a full Vitamin L concert on August 27th. After the concert a young man asked her: "What is it like to be Martin Luther King's daughter?" She answered thoughtfully, "It's a blessing and a responsibility." This beautiful response was expanded upon as she spoke to us on September 29<sup>th</sup>.

Yolanda spoke encouraging words to our chorus concerning the value of their work with Vitamin L. "I was totally blown away by the talent" she said. "The lyrics, the passion, the enthusiasm, and the gift that was coming through...what an absolutely precious, precious gift you are sharing with

young people. It is so important, so necessary, so vital.... I want to applaud you for what you are doing with your lives and through Vitamin L. It needs to be replicated all over the planet. I think if more young people had the opportunity from an early age to experience something like this ...the world would be a very different place - I know it would be a very different place."

Vitamin L chorus members and families got a chance to ask lots of questions. Yolanda was so gracious and warm to all the kids who asked questions, so good with all ages in the audience and so eloquent in all of her answers! She surely has inherited her father's tremendous gift for public speaking!

When asked if she got treated differently because of who her father was, Yolanda shared that at age eight she started at a

new school. Kids teased her and called her father a jailbird. She remembers leaving school crying on a regular basis. Her mother Coretta tried to help her understand that her father was going to jail to help people and to make things better for people, but it just didn't compute till her mom explained that he was doing it so she could go to Funtown - an Atlanta amusement park that didn't allow black people to enter. Yolanda had seen Funtown advertised on TV and really wanted to go. When she learned her dad was trying to change those discriminating rules, then she understood and thought - I know he is a good man!

She went on to say, "Kids can be very cruel to each other, that's why what you all are doing is so important. People need to be encouraged to do the right thing. Examples have to be lifted up and you are lifting up wonderful examples."

Speaking of acting, she said, "I want to do work where people leave feeling like their lives have been enriched in some way, that they have been changed - at least their thinking has been changed in some way and hopefully they will take that into their lives."

When asked to remember an encouraging phrase from her father, "Strive to be the very best that you can be," is what she shared, along with the following poem her dad used to relate to her.

*If you can't be a pine on the top of the hill, just be a scrub in the valley, but be the best little scrub*



Photo by Beale St. George

Katie Lane participates in the Q&A session with Yolanda King at Cornell.

*by the side of the hill. Be a bush if you can't be a tree.*

*If you can't be a highway, just be a trail, if you can't be the sun, be a star!*

*It isn't by size that you win or you lose, just be the best of whatever you are!*

When asked, "As a nation, what mantra would you desire that we chant on January 15?", Yolanda spoke about how each holiday has its traditions. "On King Day what we have urged is that you help somebody.... The essence of my father's mission upon this planet was to remind us that we are love, that we are all connected to each other. He came to urge us to reach outside of ourselves, to extend ourselves to oth-

ers. So...the mantra could be: *We are one as we help somebody.*" She also spoke with appreciation of her supportive mother Coretta - who reinforced her father's ideals.

I invited Yolanda to speak to the Vitamin chorus members and families with the hopes that this opportunity would deepen our experience and commitment of working for tolerance, respect and positive social change. Yolanda's message and her father's message tie in perfectly with everything we are trying to do with The Vitamin L Project. Her words resonated with the ideals and spirit of our songs and the Vitamin L mission. I am forever grateful for this wonderful gift that Yolanda has given to us!

Janice Nigro

Only after her mother explained in familiar terms did the child Yolanda understand why her father chose to go to jail

## Alum Remembers VL's First Years

I remember vividly the exposed ceilings in the basement of Belle Sherman. Our elementary years had been filled with joy in the music room, as Mr. Taco, our elementary school music teacher, encouraged us to sing, dance, and explore the joys of music. I remember, too, the day in fifth grade when Jan and Janice Nigro arrived, with news of a brand new group forming. Not yet named, we were told that this would be a group focused on children's lessons and values, and that the founders were seeking children for the chorus.

Though we shuffled into the room, giggling nervously, I quickly realized that this was an experience of which I wanted to be a part. I don't know how well a ten-year-old is able to judge sincerity, but I recall being aware that Jan and Janice had a unique vision and true passion for their project. The day I was told that I had been selected, along with a set of friends, for the chorus, I was elated. Surely, I didn't realize all the ways in which Vitamin L would touch my life.

My years since high school have been challenging, exciting, and rewarding. My experiences as a student at the University of Virginia and as a teacher in Atlanta have pressed me to construct my own realities in many



Photo by Liz Padilla  
Jill Ford

ways. Having struggled with the vast inequities in public education, my journey has come full circle for now. I have just entered a Ph.D. program in education at Emory University, and plan to focus on urban education as it relates to civic and environmental activism.

It is funny to me that Vitamin L songs have jumped into my consciousness on many occasions over the years. When I see someone enter a new environment (or if I, in fact, am that newbie) I recall Johanna Zeserson's spunky rendition of Welcome, Welcome! When I visit my grandparents at the McGraw House in Ithaca, I remember Rebecca

Green's sweet verse on Older People. There have been countless times that Jhakeem's drumming burst into my soul, and Jan's voice filled my head. These moments give me peace and propel me to accomplish the task at hand.

Last year, Vitamin L visited Atlanta to perform at the Character Education Partnership's national conference. I was amazed at all of the beautiful memories that came back to me that weekend--and each day since then. It became very clear to me that Jan and Janice took all of us under their wings, and they guided us at a very young age towards positivity and integrity. For that, I will always thank them. It was also the first time that I was able to see all of their dedication through my own eyes as an adult. I must say that it solidified what I knew as a young child: their love and enthusiasm have had an enormous impact on many lives. The support and creativity that they share is so rare in this world, and I am so fortunate to have been a part of the group.

— Jill Ford

“...Vitamin L songs have jumped into my consciousness on many occasions over the years...”

### 2003 Vitamin L Accomplishments

- \* performed 67 concerts
- \* reached 16,000 youth and 4,000 adults in concerts
- \* performed and led workshops at 37 schools, 3 education conferences, community events, festivals, and camps
- \* gave leadership and performing opportunities to our 70 chorus members

# Letter from a Vitamin L Member

"How could I live one day without music?" is a lyric by one of my favorite music artists, India Arie. Like her, I cannot imagine my life without the involvement of music. For as long as I can remember, singing has been an important part of my life.

Growing up, I was a very shy child. I was timid, quiet, and scared of strangers. Singing, however, gave me the opportunity to interact with other people and to come out of my shell. For the past four years, I have been involved with Vitamin L, traveling throughout the coun-



Photo by Laura Hamilton  
Laura Hamilton

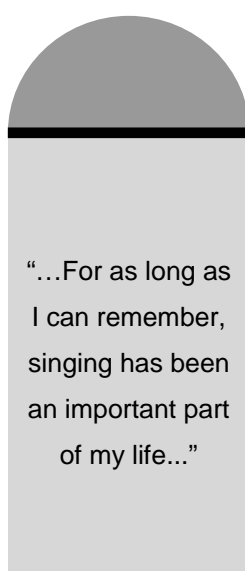
try, performing at conferences, schools, community events, and workshops.

Being in Vitamin L helped me to become the

person that I am today and has influenced my life greatly. My involvement with the group has helped me to become outgoing and caring, gave me the opportunities to perform, travel, and have positive influence in children's lives, and to have a family outside of my own. So when India Arie's song asks, "How could I live one day without music?" I simply think to myself that I could not and would not want to.

— Laura Hamilton

Member of Vitamin L Chorus & Advisory Board



"...For as long as I can remember, singing has been an important part of my life..."

## BOCES Leaders Receive Dose of Vitamin L

On Sept. 1 Vitamin L had the opportunity to help 700 Board of Cooperative Education Services (BOCES) educators in Saratoga Springs, N.Y. start off their academic year with a blast of positive energy with a Vitamin L concert.

BOCES superintendent Dr. John Stoothoff, who had seen Vitamin L at another conference, introduced the concert by saying: "As you work with

kids with their own challenges, I'm really hopeful that you might remember a lyric, a move, a note, or an

emotion from today." The VL singers received lots of positive feedback after the show!

### *The Gratitude Report*

\*The Vitamin L Project received a \$5,000 grant from The Nathan M. Ohrbach Foundation and a \$900 New York State Decentralization grant.

\*Vitamin L's 15th birthday event, along with some birthday donations, raised over \$6,000 for The VL Project.

\*Vitamin L's first car wash, organized by Lisa Wood, raised \$300.00.

## Vitamin L Kids Making a Difference

As soon as school ended, barely before starting the spirited summer routine of staying up late and sleeping in, Katie Lane and I trooped up to Lockport, New York to attend a weeklong work camp where we built or repaired houses for those less fortunate than ourselves. The hard work and the bonds we created with those around us that week were life changing. It also made me realize what an honor and privilege it is to be a member of a group like Vitamin L, because with every concert we bring a little joy and strength to those who maybe don't experience it on a regular basis. I was lucky to be able to go to Lockport and have that feeling of giving something back, and I'm luckier still to have that feeling all year round being a member of Vitamin L. - Cassie Burkhauser



**Tompkins County  
Distinguished Youth Award**

Presented To

**The Vitamin L Chorus**



**In Recognition of Your Outstanding  
Commitment to Your Community  
September 2004**

Sponsored by

- Bangs Ambulance Service**
- Tompkins County Legislature**
- Eagle Broadcasting**
- Purity Ice Cream**
- A&B Awards and Engraving**

The Vitamin L Chorus received the Tompkins County Distinguished Youth Award, given by the Tompkins County Legislature, on Sept. 21. The award goes to youth who make a positive contribution to our community. County legislator Dick Booth, who nominated the group, wrote, "For years your kids have provided a marvelous image of what young people can do, the hope they bring to all of us, and the enthusiasm they generate."

**Mission Statement**

The purpose of the Vitamin L project is to encourage positive character development through music, by uplifting and inspiring young people with lessons that are meaningful in their daily lives. Our goal is that young listeners absorb the lessons of confidence, kindness, persistence, cooperation and forgiveness presented in the songs, and weave those concepts into the fabric of their character in ways that help them make positive choices and have healthy relationships with their families, friends and the world around them. Our goal is to reach and positively influence as many children as possible.

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