

A Son Remembers... Juanita Pulos

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A Son Remembers. Juanita Pulos By William W. Pulos '77 This tribute results from my mother's lifetime of service for the betterment of society. It was composed nearly 20 years after her death. The intent is to memorialize my mother's contributions in the fields of music and fine arts in rural Western New York, most of which I only recently came to recognize and appreciate. Juanita Whitaker (Pulos '51) was born a coal miner's daughter in the small town of Cromona, KY, about 18 miles from the Virginia border, on Oct. 7, 1925. As a child, Juanita was raised in the coalfields and mining towns, living primarily in Kentucky and West Virginia. She was drawn to music at an early age. Her first piano teacher was the wife of the local doctor. The family took a liking to Juanita and served as mentors. Juanita's father had learned on his own to play the banjo and he played the instrument without sheet music. Juanita inherited this trait and she also learned to play by ear. Juanita was also blessed with perfect pitch. Her first instrument was a spinet. As she grew into her teens, Juanita studied with a local musician and learned to play the accordion as well. From the age of 12, Juanita served as the regular church pianist. In her teen-age years, she played at evangelical church revivals which drew big crowds. From those meager beginnings, Juanita's love and appreciation of music grew, taking her on a lifelong journey of extensive formal education, classical and technical music training, and service to community, children, and church. Juanita graduated from Fleming (KY) High School in 1943. In what was a considerable leap of faith, a year later she left the coalfields for good and began her collegiate education at Anderson College, Anderson, IN. It was here Juanita pursued a bachelor of science degree in piano theory. She regularly trained four hours a day to complete the applied music piano requirements. She joined Mu Phi Epsilon, the national music sorority as well as various campus groups like the Pep Club. It was while attending Anderson College Juanita met her husband, an Anderson local and professor-in-training, William L. Pulos, to whom she was married in the campus church in 1948. After graduation in 1948, Juanita immediately began teaching as an assistant instructor on the Anderson campus while continuing her college studies. She enrolled for master of music study at the Arthur Jordan Music Conservatory in Indianapolis, now part of Butler University. While at the Conservatory, Juanita continued her formal piano training in such areas as musicology, pedagogy of applied music and piano normal method. The following year, in 1949, Juanita and William packed all their belongings in a car, said good-bye to William's hometown and their alma mater and came east to Alfred University, for William's professorship that lasted 36 years. It was then that Juanita began her own 36-year relationship with the University. After settling in Alfred, Juanita immediately enrolled in the master of education program. Her courses would help Juanita transition her love of music to the public school system. The University conferred the master's degree upon Juanita two years later in 1951. A year earlier, at age 24, Juanita was hired by the merged Alfred-Almond School District as a vocal music teacher for the elementary grades, which included responsibility for the grade and junior choruses. Juanita served two terms at Alfred-Almond, 1950-55 and 1961-66. She helped produce various musical presentations and plays in addition to her teaching duties. In what was to become the hallmark of her career, she took an exceptional interest in the welfare of the children, particularly the young ones and those from disadvantaged homes. It was here Juanita began a series of special relationships she shared during her life with many friends and students, from across the spectrum, some of whom include: Miss Hazel Humphreys, Lucille and Mildred Baker, Ollene Smith, Irene Mitchell, Patricia (Spaine) Harvey, Amanda (Stevens) Snyder, Joyce and Diane Leon, Rose Emerson, Rosemarie (Emerson) Jennings and Phyllis (Emerson) Dennis, Norilyn Cornell, Angie Ninos, Margaret Butler, Margery Sands, Lisa Smith, Christine DeSain, Diana, Bob and Zoey Pittman, Fran Washburn, Diana, Charise and Rena Zwegardt, Zakia and Aida Robana and her beloved Virginia Buchanan. At the same time, Juanita began teaching piano with private lessons in her home on Jericho Hill on Elm Valley Road in the Town of Alfred, something she did her entire life. Juanita was no pushover as a teacher. When it came to piano practice, she didn't play favorites (regardless of social background) and wasn't afraid to drop piano students if they didn't practice diligently. Additionally, according to long-time student Amanda Snyder, Juanita encouraged and inspired her (and others) to practice and perform without sheet music. Sharon (Smith) Quintos from Alfred Station remembers, "she was a strict disciplinarian, she made you sit up, pay attention, and behave. She wasn't mean, (rather) in a loving manner she believed in, and taught, good manners and respect. At the same time, she would always take a few of us aside to playfully sing and perform her original compositions while (spoofing) herself. She liked to have fun." Through the years, Juanita's students presented numerous piano recitals. For example, in May of 1954, several students from Alfred-Almond performed at the Alfred home of Dr. and Mrs. Harold Simpson: Alan Whitney, Jennifer Smith, Holley

Rawe, Alan Simpson, Lynda Whitney, Charles Smith, Olyce Mitchell, Pat Mensinger and Donna Burdett (Ryan). The next academic year, 1954-55, the ALCEN student yearbook reported Juanita as the director of the junior high chorus with nearly 70 junior high students in the group photo. Typical of her Alfred-Almond service, at Christmas time of that year, The Alfred Sun reported Juanita directed about 400 children presenting the pantomime, "A Christmas Carol Pageant," featuring sixth graders George Miller, Ann Dickens, and Bill Frechette. Juanita took five years off from teaching at Alfred-Almond to have her two sons, William in 1955 and Robert '79, in 1957, both Alfred-Almond and Alfred University graduates. Once her boys started school, Juanita returned for her second term of teaching in the fall of 1961. This time she was put in charge of the entire K-12 vocal music program. The previous year 1960-61, the numbers were down; the elementary chorus had 54 children, the junior high chorus had 19 members and the senior high chorus had 18, all girls, no boys. By June 1962, Juanita recruited three boys for the senior high chorus and sent Jan Burdett (Leathersich) and Dorothy Snyder (Goodridge) as delegates to area All-State. She solidified her credentials in September of that year by earning permanent certification as a music teacher from the NYS Education Department. The turnaround soon became more profound; by 1963 there were 97 children in elementary chorus, 48 in junior high and 67 (including 21 boys) in senior high chorus with four members going to All-State competition. The following year, 1963-64, in what could be considered her crowning achievement Juanita recruited, taught, coached, and directed six separate choral groups at the school: junior high chorus, senior high chorus, a new sixth-grade girls chorus with 27 members, a new sixth- grade boys chorus with 17 members, a new combo group with 80 members dubbed "(the) harmonaires," and incredibly, an elementary chorus with 134 members, all in addition to her regular teaching duties. Juanita had so many children and teenagers singing that year it took a full three pages of the ALCEN student yearbook to print all the group's composite photos. Nevertheless, she knew the names of all the children. She had a knack for recruiting. Another of Juanita's students, Jennie Hanks Wright from Almond, NY, remembers that Juanita "made me feel she was genuinely glad to have me near her. She had such an appreciation and joy in the music. She made every child or person in her presence feel very special by giving each her full attention. In my mind, that is the greatest gift that a teacher can give a child." In 1961, Juanita also returned to Alfred University, again as a graduate student, to continue her post-master's degree course of study. For the next five years, she taught public school full-time and pursued her graduate school studies while raising two young children. In doing so, she integrated her learning of music theory and psychology of music at the University by implementing them with her social science training of teaching music in the public schools. In addition to becoming involved in the public school and University communities, Juanita continued her lifelong commitment to the church. In 36 years, she devoted her efforts to four separate church congregations and volunteered for numerous others. Juanita followed her fundamentalist Baptist roots upon her Alfred arrival by serving the Alfred Seventh Day Baptist Church in the 1950s. She sang in the choir for many years and it was there she began her study and mastery of the church's dynamic pipe organ. Her mentor in learning the pipe organ was Dr. Melvin LeMon, the noted, longtime professor of music at Alfred University. Their relationship was very close for many years. Her sons knew Dr. LeMon as "Uncle Mel." In 1960, Juanita joined the Union University Church, coinciding with the simultaneous hiring of the Reverend Richard V. Bergren as pastor and Dr. LeMon as organist and choir director. These gentlemen succeeded to the roles formerly held at the Church by AU President Dr. Booth C. Davis as pastor, Mrs. Joseph Seidlin as organist, and Mrs. Lois Boren Scholes as choir director. In 1967, after Alfred-Almond, Juanita began college teaching at Alfred University in the Music Department as a lecturer. She held that post for nearly 20 years until her death. Juanita's specialty was as a tutor for students in piano and organ. She offered lessons on campus and continued with private lessons in her home. While teaching at the University, Juanita honed her skills with post-graduate work in such fields as compositional techniques, contemporary styles, and modern harmony. Always yearning for more, Juanita enrolled for study at the prestigious Eastman School of Music at the University of Rochester, proving (among other things) that her skill level and desire were still serious business. She extended her commitment and involvement with long-time memberships in the American Association of University Women (AAUW) and the NYS Music Teachers Association. The 1970s brought change to Juanita and once again she was called for service, both in the public schools and in the church. At almost 50 years of age, Juanita embarked on what likely was her most difficult professional challenge, this time in Steuben County. The Greenwood Central School advertised a (single salary) dual teaching position for both vocal music and visual arts. In recommending Juanita for the job, Alfred University's President Dr. Leland Miles told the Greenwood Superintendent Mr. Gary Moore "(Juanita was) an outstanding community citizen and fine musician." In essence, Juanita was recruited as a state-certified professional to teach music and art, for grade levels K-12 at Greenwood (combining the duties of three or four teaching positions) in one classroom. In describing the job Mr. Moore wrote "The situation Juanita walked into was

disturbing . . . inadequate supplies, inadequate classroom space and an almost impossible schedule." Uniquely, this required her to teach visual arts and get formal training in the field at the same time. Never one to shrink from a challenge, Juanita again returned to Alfred University, this time for course work in the visual arts including technical art, art and art history, form and sound relationships, ultimately seeking to merge the music she loved with the visuals she cherished. The Greenwood school superintendent's subsequent evaluations are indicative of Juanita's skills and talents. At the beginning, Juanita was described as "tremendous, hard working, extremely flexible and excellent in communication and student/teacher relationships." Less than one year into the job, the superintendent recognized Juanita's gift for helping disadvantaged children by writing Juanita "has done a lot to benefit many youngsters and high school students who in some situations have not been what one might consider successful." In 1975, Juanita was described as "a lady with a great big heart who opens it up to all of the children she has anything to do with . . . before school, after school, evenings, weekends she spends a great deal of time in creating a tremendous teacher/student relationship." By the end of three semesters, the superintendent documented that Juanita had taken "25-30 students, with no apparent talent for art or music and had encouraged them to do things such as sing solos and produce their own art work. I see Juanita Pulos as a woman who gives 120 percent to the school She is the most warm and kind-hearted person to the students as she gives of herself I would find it very difficult to find anyone who is willing to take the load that she does." At the end of four semesters, the superintendent reported Juanita in music class "was working for excellence in timing and quality . . . which takes a great deal of work and patience at no time did Juanita leave any doubt that she was going to get what she wanted (out of the students)." Juanita's work at Greenwood came to a premature end after two-and-a-half years for budgetary reasons. In 1974, Juanita began serving the congregation of the nearby First Baptist Church of Canisteo, where she was organist and choir director for six years. During the '50s, '60s, and '70s, Juanita played and sang in many chorales, combos and choruses across a diverse spectrum. One of the first was the Alfred-Almond trio of Jackie (Paine) Walker, Rosemarie (Emerson) Jennings and Patty (Spaine) Harvey, to whom she gave voice lessons and for whom she accompanied at various clubs, meetings and groups where they sang. Juanita performed in all types of arenas and venues ranging from the small Phillips Creek church on Route 244 with the Decker family and friends in the Town of Ward to Miss Humphreys' Gothic Chapel in Alfred. She performed in the off-Broadway production of "The Fantastiks" and participated in numerous high school, college, and community musicals. She could play method, classical, Broadway, swing, religious, honky-tonk, and rock-and-roll. In 1979, Juanita was asked to play at her son Robert's Alfred University graduation. That year the University bestowed the actor Robert Klein with an honorary degree. At the time, Klein was starring in the widely renowned Broadway play, "They're Playing Our Song." As part of the program, Juanita played the title track from that production. As she continued her love of music by sharing everything she had to give with others, Juanita was again called to the public school classroom, this time by serving as a substitute teacher in a variety of subjects, in a variety of local public schools, including Hornell, Canisteo, and Andover into the early 1980s. In 1980, she began serving her fourth major congregation, the Alfred Methodist Church, reuniting with her longtime neighbors from Jericho Hill, Bob and Janet Love and many other good friends. Bob Love recounted, "We always tell of Juanita stopping students on the street and getting them involved in the church choir. She was a hard one to refuse. Her enthusiasm was contagious and everyone loved her." Once again, Juanita held the familiar posts of organist-choir director and encouraged all the adults (as well as students) to sing, convincing each of them they could carry a tune. Glenn Fairchild related, "Juanita always was after everyone to be in the choir. She was relentless. I couldn't carry a tune but Juanita always was telling me what a great voice I had!" Tragically, Juanita was stricken with breast cancer in 1984, at the age of 58. She faced that challenge, stoically and privately, with prayer, by calling upon the spirit and experience of her youth in the coalfields and in the church, believing in the eternity of afterlife. She refused surgery, radiation, and chemotherapy. Outside of her family (and incredibly to some), very few knew of her illness up to the date of her untimely passing in March 1986 in Wellsville, NY, at the age of 60. Fittingly, one of Juanita's earliest and longest-tenured private students, Amanda Snyder, who went on to become a music teacher and performer in her own right, was the organist for Juanita's funeral service at the Alfred Methodist Church. Dr. James Rausch of Alfred University was the soloist. Many mourned the passing of Juanita Whitaker Pulos. By bringing her gifts to the Allegany-Steuben community, she touched the lives of thousands by sharing her passion and talent for bringing music and people together. Ultimately, in many respects, she had something in common with another coal miner's daughter, Loretta Lynn. (William W. Pulos was born Aug. 29, 1955, to William L. Pulos and Juanita W. Pulos. He has one brother, Robert. They grew up on the family farm. William was schooled at Alfred-Almond, Alfred University, and Albany Law School. William is managing partner in the Hornell, NY, law firm of Pulos and Rosell, LLP. He still lives in Alfred.)