

Stella Clarke: musician and teacher

Born: 1935 in England

Family: husband Bryce Missall; adult step-children Tibetha, Braden; step-grandchildren Natanis, 5, Skyler, 16, Jupiter, 2

By Louise Charach



Stella Clarke, a third-generation teacher, brought her talents and gifts to Canada in her early teens. She was born in England, the elder in a family of two. Her adopted brother is eight years younger than Stella.

Stella's father was a local preacher of the Wesleyan Methodist church and the church and its beliefs were strong influencers in Stella's young life. She was very active in the church, attending Sunday school and singing in the Sunday School choir. Between the services and Sunday school, Sundays were totally devoted to the church. The Methodist church has a rich musical tradition and her father was a very talented tenor who could have pursued a profession as a soloist. Stella's musical genes helped her achieve Grade 6 level from the Toronto Conservatory and she shone as our UCE church accompanist for many years.

Stella's family had strict guidelines and high expectations with education being stressed as an important part of life. This work ethic has stayed with Stella and enabled her to accomplish many things in her chosen profession of teaching.

Stella's maternal grandparents were a major influence and a source of love and caring during her younger years and she remembers special visits and holidays with them. She was especially close to her grandfather. She recollects singing songs around the piano with music being a focal point of entertainment. A special time of solitude and reflection was spent in the farmyard and it was "her place."

Stella's mother passed on when Stella was in her early twenties. Her father soon remarried and her step mother, Marguerite, became an important part of her life, until she passed away four years ago.

She has another family too – The Fjerwold family, who has been a part of her life for 50 years. Auntie Stella has acted as guardian, celebrated family events, shared Christmas and other occasions, house sat, dog sat and generally been part of this Edmonton family for decades. She also had the privilege of presiding at the wedding ceremony for the elder daughter.

A Busy Life

Most of high school was completed in England. Stella remembers a daily train ride to attend a school previously attended by her mother. University years resulted in both a B.Ed and and M. Ed. She taught elementary school, mostly primary level and later special education (emotionally disturbed, physically disabled). Later she taught students with delayed language and reading development. Stella also worked at the Glenrose Hospital as an assessment team member for the Department of Education.

For four summers as a young woman, she worked as a summer worker for the Alberta Conference of the United Church conducting workshops for leaders of camps and vacation schools.

Additionally, Stella became a presenter for the Alberta Teachers Association (ATA). Other training included Basic and Advanced Leadership Schools provided by UU's in the Northwest States, at Port Townsend, Washington.

When Stella started teaching, strapping of students was the all-round solution to any disruptive behaviour. Her approach with difficult students centred on respect and, careful listening. Stella saw promise in each student and parents and peers admired her skills in changing behaviour without physical punishment. The astonished parent of a historically disruptive boy asked her, “what have you done to my son?” and commented that he was calmer at home, a rare event. Stella replied “when his voice goes up, mine goes down.” Stella was the unfortunate victim of bullying in high school and that experience may have sensitized her to responding with heart, not force to solve problems.

Stella retired at age 55 and volunteered with UCE and in the community. She has devoted hours to Ten Thousand Villages, the Edmonton Humane Society and the ATA with Project Teach and other workshops.

The UCE Experience

“Coming to the church has enabled me to know and accept myself and grow as an individual, make friends and enjoy community.” – Stella Clarke

When Stella worked at the Glenrose Hospital, she was good friends with Dorothy Jones, who recognized a Unitarian in the making and brought her a pamphlet to the church. Stella became very involved with UCE board work, committee work and workshops. A course, “The Story of My life,” taken 20 years ago, brought together a group of friends, Beth and Barry Jenkins, Bonnie Kyle and Loretta Kyle. This special network of Beth, Bonnie and Loretta continue to meet and support each other.

A highlight of Stella’s life at UCE was as a Chaplain for an eight year period. She officiated at weddings, memorials and namings and was an integral part of the spiritual life of the church.

Stella was the Project Coordinator on the” Refinishing the Chairs” task. She and her committee made a case to keep them, lined up volunteers, chose fabric, chose the finish, encouraged volunteers and the crews scraped and stained for hours. Upon reflection, she saw the value and quality beneath the tarnish and stains and declared them worth saving to reach their amazing potential. Hmmm!

To the newcomers to our church, Stella recommends they come to several services, attend special events and volunteer to help on a committee or project. This is how you learn the essence of the church and come to know our community.

Then Cupid Enters...

Stella and Bryce, a life long Unitarian, met at church and were together nine years before they married August 20, 2011. For those of us fortunate enough to attend this occasion, it was impossible not to be moved by the love and caring in that

room. They had previously met when Stella was Chaplain. She composed the eulogy for the memorial of Bryce's wife, Pat, 20 years ago.

Besides welcoming the children and grandchildren, Stella and Bryce have a blended animal family. Spatz, Bootsie and Zephyr round out their complete family.

Bryce describes Stella with love and admiration and applauds her openness and honesty. She is sensitive and caring and he feels gratitude for being the "love of her life." Since their marriage, they have supported each other in "sickness and in health" as they have both faced health challenges.

Stella has strong support from three groups of women who maintain ties and nurture each other in addition to her husband's devotion.

Challenges for UCE

Stella thinks we need to stay current while respecting the past. It will continue to be a challenge to provide for the diverse range of needs of the congregation. The Pub Night idea is a positive one, reaching out to a specific group.

The UCE needs to provide a variety of programming based upon the needs and interests of the congregation. We need to be stimulated by new learning.

And, true to our principles, we need to lend a hand and continue to support the disadvantaged in our society, says Stella.

Interviewed 2014