

Kate Munger, creator of
the Threshold Choir.

guided by voices

For Kate Munger conducting
a choir that sings for the
terminally ill isn't just a
job—it's a daily,
life-affirming act.

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Kate Munger puts 33,000 miles a year on her dark green 1990 Plymouth van driving to work. A typical week for Munger looks like this:

- Saturday: Drive from home, in Inverness, California, to San Francisco; three hours round-trip.
- Monday: Drive to San Francisco; three hours round-trip.
- Tuesday: Drive to Santa Cruz; 3½ hours one way.
- Wednesday: Drive to the peninsula near Silicon Valley; spend the night before returning home; seven hours.
- Thursday: Drive to Oakland; three hours round-trip.
- Friday: Drive to Marin County; two hours round-trip.

In other cities with a car culture, like Los Angeles and Atlanta, the average commuter racks up 15,000 to 20,000 miles a year. The coast-hugging views on Munger's road trips are a perk of a job that's less of a daily grind than a labor of love.

Munger, 56, is the founder of the Threshold Choir, whose members sing to the critically ill and dying—some very young, most very old. "We try to give the client a tiny oasis," she says, "a place where they're being attended to in a kind and gentle way." Rather than grim, these "bedsides"—half-hour a cappella concerts—

are soothing to patient and singers alike.

The idea of serenading the ill came to Munger in 1990, when she was caring for a friend who lay comatose, dying of AIDS. She tidied his house and tended his garden, but she wanted to comfort him in a more meaningful way. So she set aside the chores, pulled up a chair close to his bed, and sang softly for a few hours. Watching his breath deepen and slow, she believed that her voice reached him. "Anyone can wash dishes or weed the garden," she says. "By singing, I felt like I had given him a part of myself. I also noticed it had calmed me down." Her friend died a few days after her visit. With that powerful experience in mind, Munger began to think about creating a choir to provide similar experiences—"kindness made audible"—to others.

Music has been a lifelong passion and a constant for Munger, from the lullabies her mother crooned to her as a child (her favorite was "Tender Shepherd," from the musical *Peter Pan*); to rounds, such as "White Choral Bells," sung around the campfire when she was an eight-year-old Girl Scout; to choir practices throughout high school and college. After earning a master's degree in psychology in 1986, Munger pursued a career as a psychotherapist but abandoned that path because she found the work didn't suit her. ("To me, it's a lot of gnashing of teeth and going over old wounds," she explains.) She wanted to connect with others in positive ways and became an elementary-school music teacher in 1990, often, she says, "spending more than I was paid" on instruments for the classes.

Around the same time, Munger and her husband, Jim Fox, 57, the Inverness fire chief and the water-system operator, were busy raising their son, Kalloch, now 25, and building their dream home. The two-story clapboard house, which was built in fits and starts as their finances allowed, sits on two acres of forest overlooking Alder Creek Canyon, where Munger and Fox hike whenever they get the chance. It took 14 years from start to finish, during which time the family lived in two trailers on the property (one trailer now serves as Fox's woodworking shop). The views alone—Bishop pines and Pacific madrones, with woodpecker and osprey nests on one side and Tomales Bay, Munger's year-round swimming pool, on another—made the wait worthwhile.

Below: Kate Munger logs more than 30,000 miles a year as the leader of 12 choirs across Northern California. Opposite: Marin Threshold Choir members (from left) Connie Long, Judy Jessop, Caroline Warner, Rebecca Herrero, and Laura Fannon at rehearsal.







Top row from left: Marin Choir member Susan Miller; 70 songs in the repertoire were written by choir members; Munger coordinates members from her Inverness, California home. Middle row from left: Caroline Warner rehearses with her choir; Munger makes sure members sing in harmony; Debbie Ruskay at a bedside. Bottom row from left: Munger, Miller and Joan Owen, Mary Beth Patterson, Ruskay, Munger, Joanne Fullagar, Sally Shannon, and Redwing Keyssar; Marin choir member Patty Wolfe.

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Like the house, the choir took form in baby steps. For years, Munger had been organizing informal singing circles to perform at community events by mailing postcards to friends. She also started writing her own music (she plays guitar and piano). By December 1999, she had collected 500 names—friends, friends of friends, and people who had sung in her circles. Having just bought her first computer ("I bought it two days before Y2K—that's how much I *didn't* know about technology"), she discovered e-mail and promptly sent out a message announcing the start of a bedside choir. Fifteen women responded. Three months later, rehearsals for the first two Threshold Choirs, one in East Bay and one in San Rafael, began.

Their first performance, in April 2000, was for a psychiatrist and cellist friend with lupus. "She had been sick for 25 years, and when it's been that long, friends tend to fall by the wayside," Munger recalls. "This was a wonderful connection for her, a way to find beauty in a place where there isn't that much. We sang to her every week for nine months. Four choir members and her family were with her when she died."

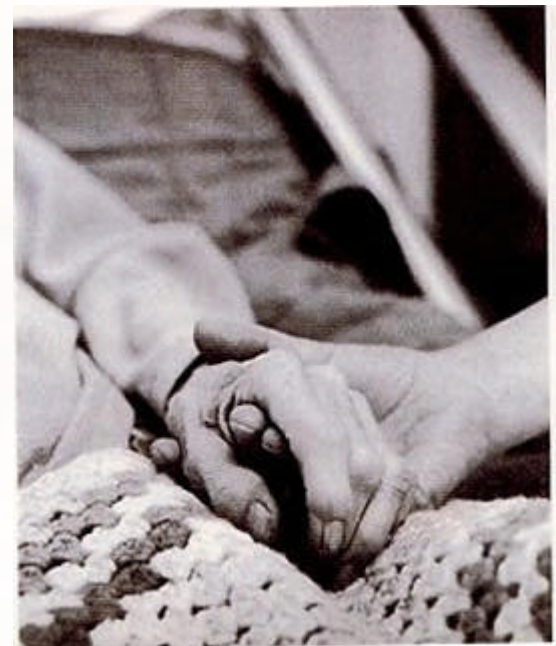
The choir's ranks swelled through word of mouth; Munger added two new choirs every six months for the next three years, grouping volunteers geographically, scheduling appointments, and arranging rehearsal times and sites. In addition to the 12 chapters scattered throughout Northern California, there are now 29 nationwide and two in Canada. They sing for free in groups of two or three in hospitals, nursing homes, and private homes by invitations extended by patients or their relatives or caregivers. While the choir has no religious affiliation, the 290-song repertoire includes two hymns, as well as songs in 10 foreign languages, from French to Zulu. They sing works by artists as varied as Bach ("Ave Maria"), the Beatles ("Yesterday"), and Bob Dylan ("Lay Down Your Weary Tune"). The most frequent request is "Amazing Grace," but most often the selections chosen have great personal meaning for the patient—for example, the first song he or she danced to as a newlywed.

"Music, and singing in particular, is a heart-opening thing," says the Reverend Christine Morgan, chaplain at Laguna Honda Hospice, in San Francisco, where choir members visit weekly as part of a patient's palliative care.

"Music nourishes the soul," adds Myriam Molina. Members sang to her 91-year-old father, Jorge, in Spanish. "He probably didn't know why they were singing to him—his mind wasn't as it used to be—but he was smiling."

Sometimes members find themselves sharing a patient's family's grief. Marilyn Meikle, 50, and her cohorts from the Sonoma County choir went to the Friends House retirement home, in Santa Rosa, to sing to 86-year-old Connell Korb. His wife, Fran, and their children, grandson, and friends had gathered in the room. Fran and daughter Margaret Korb stroked Connell's hand during the concert as his breathing slowed and finally stopped. "We were all crying," says Fran Korb, "but we were also smiling, because it was so right. He was calm; he wasn't fighting anything." It was the first time Meikle had witnessed someone dying, but she wasn't traumatized. "How many people die surrounded by those they love?" she says. "It was wonderful to support them in this way."

Not everyone wants to be sung to, however, so the choir members always ask permission first. Once, after singing to a patient, members were urged by a nurse to sing to a patient sleeping in another room. He awoke and demanded that the singers leave.



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"People are honest," says Laura Fannon, 53, a lawyer and a doctoral student in clinical psychology who sings in the Marin County choir. "'Would you like us to sing to you?' 'No.' I get that half the time. They're not in the mood, or whatever. But I haven't sensed anyone letting us sing who didn't really want us to, just to be polite."

Women join to make a difference; they remain, in large measure, for the sense of community the choir provides. Rehearsals, which are held for 2½ hours twice a month, aren't confined to memorizing lyrics and learning to harmonize, though musicality is important. ("If I were on my deathbed," Fannon says, "I'm not sure I'd want to hear off-key singing, no matter how heartfelt.") They share bedside experiences, seek advice about difficult patient situations, and raise personal issues, such as coping with the loss of loved ones.

Members also stay for the difference the choir has made for them on a personal level. "I've sung my entire life, but if I had to be in one more production of *South Pacific*, I'd shoot myself," says Maria Culberson, a 36-year-old schoolteacher and a member of the Sonoma County choir. "I thought it would be a way to do something for others—a mitzvah [a kind act]—but the more you spend time at bedsides, the more you realize what's

important in life. I left an unfulfilling corporate job to go back to school and try something new. The choir was a catalyst for change."

Membership, limited to women because their range of voices makes harmonizing easier, numbers close to 500 and crosses age, racial, and socioeconomic lines to include students in their 20s, working moms in their 40s, and retired nurses in their 80s. (Five men belong to the mixed Midnight Choir, whose name is taken from a line in the Leonard Cohen song "Bird on the Wire.") New volunteers take 6 to 12 months to learn the repertoire. Becoming comfortable at bedsides, at witnessing dying, can be more challenging. "Hospitals can freak a lot of people out," Munger says. "We're afraid of old people, aging, and death." Recognizing the difficulty, she says, in "wrapping your mind around your mortality," she conducts daylong workshops led by hospice nurses. One workshop encouraged members to put in writing the medical attention they want to receive when the end is near. They also make decisions about their funerals ("I don't want aggressive treatment, should that be necessary, but I'd like a big, rocking funeral," Munger says) and compose final messages to family and friends, which has moved some not to wait until it's too late. "I'm now more willing to discuss things when a misunderstanding happens," says Jan Marks, 50, of the Sonoma County choir. "If you can think of things you want to say to someone before you die, it's a good idea to say it now."

To add levity to the bonds members have formed with one another under intense conditions, Munger hosts "play days." Twice a year, she invites members to her house to eat dinner, socialize, swim, and bird-watch. By definition, volunteers don't expect compensation. In fact, their personal donations and other charitable contributions, totaling less than \$20,000 a year, allow Munger to make this her full-time job. "I don't feel like I've given up anything to do this," she says. "I get unbelievable riches, though not the kind you can hold in your hand."

The late Benedictine monk John Main wrote, "To have life in focus, we must have death in our field of vision." The Threshold Choir singers do, translating bedside experiences into fuller celebrations of their own lives. "They're lucky," Munger says. "They know that every single second is precious." ■

Opposite: An inspirational quotation at Laguna Grove Care, where choir members often sing. Below: Munger and her dog Surely, at home.



