**Mendocino County accompanist Denise Beckler retiring, but still ticklin’ the ivories**

**Accomplished accompanist Denise Beckler retiring**

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One of the area’s most sought-after accompanists is also accompanist for the Ukiah Symphony Orchestra, Masterworks Chorale, many local musical productions, plays for several area churches for special occasions/events – and more – and she’s retiring.

Although music has always been, and will continue to be, a big part of her life, Denise Beckler’s night rehearsals at the college have become challenging. “I have tendonitis in my left thumb. Often after rehearsal my hand hurts,” she explained.

That doesn’t mean she won’t still be playing the piano. Since 1991, she was the accompanist at First Presbyterian Church-Ukiah, then in 1994 became choir director, then music director, and is responsible for (along with the pastor) designing the Sunday worship service each week. This year will be the 10th year she co-produces the church-sponsored annual Christmas Carol SingAlong.

Beckler is married to Randy Beckler), is a mother and a grandmother, but you’d never know it by the schedule she keeps.

After working at Mendocino County Office of Education for 25 years, she became the office manager at First Presbyterian Church.

Beckler is a natural at the keyboard, beginning her journey at age 4.

“Dad would wake me up and sit me on the piano bench when he had friends over. I made up this little song and he would have me play it for them. That’s when my parents decided to teach me to read music. As soon as I could identify a note, my mother would play a note on the piano and I would sit across the room and tell her what note it was. I have relative pitch so if you play a note on the piano I can recognize it.” Most students have to take an ear training class in college to accomplish this feat!

Born in Bloomfield, Iowa, Beckler’s father was a band teacher at the high school. “He shared with my junior high teacher that I played piano, so that’s when I began playing for musicals. Then we moved to Colorado so he could get his doctorate (an EDD in Fine Arts).

“In junior high, I played the oboe and got involved with band,” explained the musician. “When the director learned about my piano capability, I played oboe less and less and piano more and more. I played clarinet first, then turned to the oboe, pretty much teaching myself, though Dad helped with fingering and embouchure (position and use of the lips, tongue and teeth in playing a wind instrument).”

In high school, Beckler continued to play for musicals, including when she moved to Nebraska for college, while getting her AA in interior design. She had never played in a pit orchestra until Ukiah – before that always solo piano. One year she and her mother played duo pianos for the musical “South Pacific” – a very unusual event.

Beckler married Randy, then he got a job that moved them 11 times in four years until they landed in Ukiah.

About accompanying –it’s a common thread in the musical world – accompanists are under-appreciated!

When asked, “What are some things you wish more people understood about accompanying especially major works,” Beckler replied, “I’ve always been a good sight reader so it’s not been difficult for me. I think that what people should understand that a lot of years have gone into preparing me to get to this point.

“Most careers, when people work the number of years as I have, their salary and benefits and respect reflect that, different from ‘Oh, you’re just an accompanist…you’re not a professional.’ It’s like saying, ‘you’re just a housewife. I have never, ever felt underappreciated by Les Pfutzenreuter or any of the groups that I’ve worked with (Chorale, theater groups, etc.) in Ukiah.”

When asked, “What did you like most about accompanying at the college,” Beckler quickly responded, “The humor and fun that we have there, like a community or family.”

**Accompanists around the globe weigh in on this subject.**

Jing Li, in a 2011 blog of WQXR, had this to say: “Behind every successful man there is a woman, or so the old saying goes. In the music world, behind every brilliant soloist there is his or her accompanist. For decades, accompanists have been thought to be less skilled than solo pianists. They get their names on the bill and if they are lucky, a nod on stage from their partners (to this day, a Facebook group exists for ‘People for the Ethical Treatment of Accompanists’).

“Most of us see pianists in non-solo, collaborative acts… Somewhere in our subconscious we know we can count on the accompanist in that ballet class so little girls in tutus don’t miss a step.

“This is the pianist in everyday life. He or she is many things: coach, partner, performing artist, moral support, one’s best friend on stage, sometimes the main voice of a church choir; the pianist in everyday life focuses on helping others stay focused on stage.

“Since the 1980s several top conservatories including The Juilliard School, Manhattan School of Music, New England Conservatory and Eastman School of Music have developed their own accompanying, or collaborative piano departments. People were starting to recognize that good pianists are not always good at accompanying.

“The ability to ‘sight-read’ is a must, though the word itself is misleading. Merely reading music at sight is not enough. Good accompanists read and play music that is new to them with instant interpretation. They are also expected to have learned a vast repertoire and can play anything from concertos to songs to chamber works the moment they sit at the piano bench.

“At times the sign of a good accompanist is that the audience doesn’t even notice the piano – the collaboration is so seamless that two artists have become one. But an excellent accompanist won’t let the piano simply be buried. After all, Beethoven wrote his cello sonatas for ’Pianoforte and Violoncello’ and not the other way around.”

Post retirement plans include “Quilting…I’ll probably do more of that. Also will continue working at the church part-time because I still love my job. We hope to travel and hopefully remodel our kitchen and dining room (Randy likes to do most of the work himself).