

PEOPLE, PLACES, LIFESTYLES of the MINNESOTA RIVER VALLEY

MANKATO

magazine

Well Read

Mankato's thriving literary community

MSU: a creative writing hub

Authors gather at Writer's Bloc

A visit to Once Read

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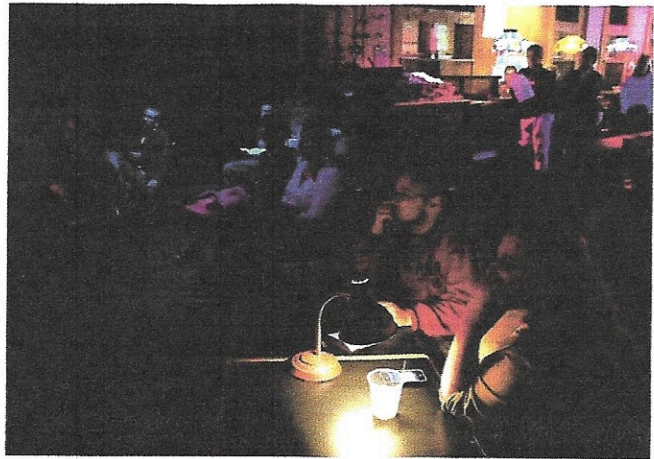
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In her pink cowboy hat and boots, Michele Oslund sings with Lisa Murphy at some of her shows, partly out of love for singing and partly as a kind of therapy for Parkinson's disease.

A healing

Michele Oslund has found singing soothes her Parkinson's symptoms



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The creative writing hub

The Good Thunder reading series and MSU's creative writing program are a foundation of our literary community.

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The Write Stuff

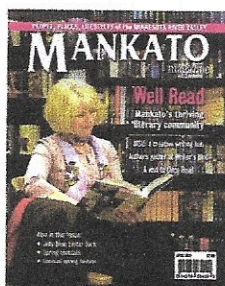
Monthly gatherings of writers help with feedback and support.



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A healing voice

Michele Oslund has found singing soothes her Parkinson's symptoms.



*On the cover:
Wilbur Frink thumbs through a book
at Barnes & Noble in Mankato.
Photo by John Cross*

Michele Oslund is not taking Parkinson's disease quietly. She is facing the debilitating condition by getting back to her musical roots and singing.

That's why Oslund can be seen around town in her pink cowboy hat and boots singing harmony for The Singing Cowgirl, Lisa Murphy, who entertains folks at local retirement communities and elsewhere.

"It's an absolute joy," Oslund said.

In 1995, Oslund was diagnosed with Parkinson's, a brain disorder that leads to shaking, tremors and difficulty in walking, coordination and movement. Another side effect is slowed, quieter speech and a monotone voice.

Due to Parkinson's medications, Oslund can no longer drive. So Murphy drives her to the gigs in her Cowgirl Machine, a blue 2009 Dodge Ram Pickup with a vanity plate that reads COWGIRL.

"I call her the second cowgirl in command when she comes along," Murphy said.

Murphy dresses for her shows in cowboy boots with spurs, cowboy hats and custom-made chinks, a dressy version of chaps. When Oslund followed suit, her three grown children couldn't believe she bought a pink cowboy hat and boots at the age of 66.

"That's just the right time," Oslund told her children.

When the two are out and about in costume, they get a lot of attention.

"She gets a big kick out of that," Murphy said.

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Recently, The Singing Cowgirl and Oslund entertained about 20 people in the MRCI EASE Program, which offers activities for retirement-aged people with disabilities.

When Murphy performs, she involves her audience in the show. So she began with '50s music to get people singing and dancing.

"There are a lot of happy feet out there today," said Kathy Sturm, EASE retirement and adult day care supervisor.

Murphy also teases her audience members and is rewarded with smiles and laughter. She showed a few men the message on her spurs, which reads "Cowgirls Rule."

"Cowgirls rule and cowboys obey," Murphy said with a laugh.

"We get these subtle messages out," Oslund said.

Oslund joined Murphy on "Beautiful Brown Eyes,"

"Home on the Range" and Anne Murray's "Could I Have this Dance."

"Could I Have This Dance" is a favorite of Oslund's. Singing harmony, Oslund comes in at the chorus and watches Murphy's face, focusing intently on her eyes and mouth to stay on top of the lyrics.

Oslund recalled singing the song for a woman who has Alzheimer's disease and lives in Keystone Communities of Mankato. The woman and her husband enjoyed dancing together during their long marriage. Now her husband, son and daughter-in-law visit her at Keystone.

When they sang "Could I Have This Dance" there were tears in the eyes of the whole family, Oslund said.

"That's something, having people respond to your music," Oslund said.

Music has long been a part of Oslund's life. She studied music and French at Mankato State College, graduating in 1966. She also played the violin and viola in the Mankato Symphony Orchestra for about 10 years in the 1960s and 1970s.

She was part of a group called the Serendipity Singers, participated in college theater and sang folk songs at hoo-tenannies in the '60s. For many years she headed up to churches in the Twin Cities to sing.

Then singing fell by the wayside, but while living in Primrose Retirement Community in Duluth, a band director encouraged her to sing and perform there.

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Oslund first saw The Singing Cowgirl at Mankato's Primrose Retirement Community in June of 2008, after moving there to be closer to family. During the performance, Oslund sang along in harmony.



voice

By Marie Wood

Photos By Pat Christman

Murphy could hear Oslund singing so she sang a few songs with her. After the show, Oslund bought The Singing Cowgirl CD, and about a year later got up the nerve to call Murphy and ask for voice lessons.

"She has such a terrific voice and marvelous stage presence," Oslund said.

Murphy brought her guitar over and the two would sing together with Murphy in lead and Oslund in harmony.

"With Parkinson's, it affects my muscles. That includes the muscles in the vocal chords. It makes the muscles stiff," Oslund said.

Oslund has learned that exercising the muscles and vocal chords can help to stabilize Parkinson's.

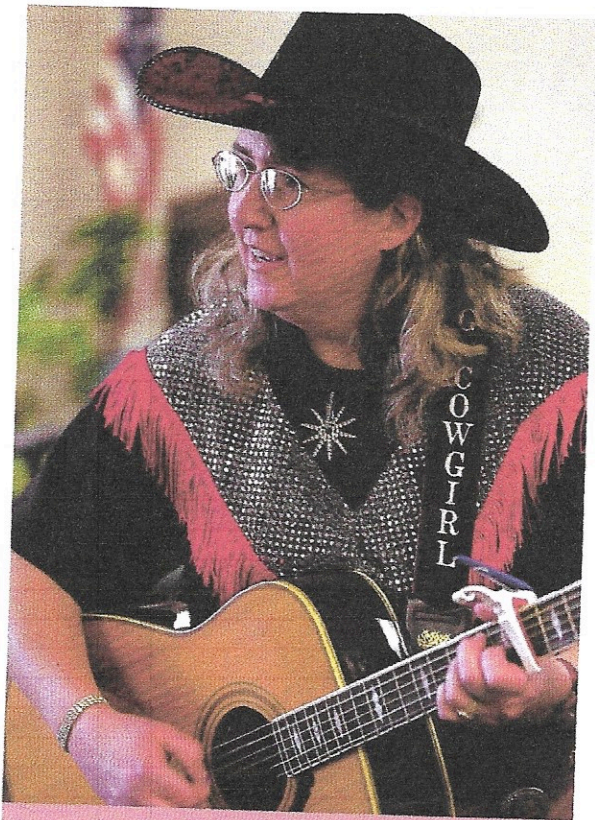
"By keeping my vocal chords going, there are days when I can sing well. I hum for an hour or two to get the chords vibrating," she said.

Oslund knows that her voice has gone down in register; she can't hit as high of notes any longer. Her goal is to improve her voice and keep it strong.

"Parkinson's will eventually take away my ability to sing. That's a point I'm not anxious to meet," Oslund said.

In the meantime, Oslund sings with The Singing Cowgirl about once a month and to her three grandchildren, all under the age of 3.

"I take each day as it comes," Oslund said. **M**



The Singing Cowgirl, Lisa Murphy, does many shows at retirement communities and elsewhere.

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