



*Melva*  
*Sebesta*

Material prepared by Grace Littlefield

## Melva Sebesta – Life Lessons

Melva Sebesta was my high school choir director, mentor, adopted mother, and best friend. She tried her best to discourage me from pursuing a career in choral music even though I felt it was my calling. In spite of her misgivings, she was always one of my greatest critics and supporters. Through her guidance, I became the teacher I am today and these are just a few of the life lessons she taught.

Lesson number one: “To be early is to be on time; to be on time is to be late.” I never learned what it meant to be late because I did not want “the look” or the lecture that followed.

Lesson number two: “Everyone has a place in choir.” We had mixed choir rehearsal at 7:15 a.m. in the morning and men’s and women’s choirs during the school day. Everyone was in both the organizations even if they were not the best singer. We were a team – there were no bench sitters in the Gregory-Portland High School Choraleirs and Chordsmen.

Lesson number three: “Trust is used until abused.” Melva always gave us enough rope to hang ourselves, but trusted that she had instilled in us the values and morals we needed to make the right choices in spite of our adolescent brains, at least when representing our choir.

Lesson number four: “You are representing your school, your parents, your community, and yourselves.” This relates back to lesson number three. Melva constantly reminded us of our responsibility and how we presented ourselves. Many have commented about the militaristic precision of our choirs...we were drilled well. Melva was a band director prior to becoming a choir director when she and Joe moved to Gregory-Portland.

Lesson number five: “You never have a second chance to make a first impression.” Melva spent time in class teaching us how to shake hands, look people in the eye, and speak with authority. She knew these skills would serve us well in any profession.

Lesson number six: “Not to decide; is to decide.” Melva was never one to sit on the fence about anything. She was a “get on or get off the pot” type of person in all aspects of her life.

Lesson number seven: “Always support the home team.” Melva was a master at PR. Gregory-Portland was a small town with a small town newspaper. She always supported every group at our school by cutting out newspaper articles and sending them to each group or person congratulating them on their accomplishment or words of encouragement if the team had not done so well. Many times she was asked by the head football coach and athletic director, Ray Akins, to speak at the pep rallies to encourage pride in our school. No one ever left the pep rally during the Alma Mater at the end of the pep rally because she was guarding the door. She commanded that sort of respect from all of the student body, not just the choir students.

Lesson number eight: “Know when things are ‘tongue-in-cheek’.” Melva taught us irony better than anyone. She would stick her tongue in the side of her cheek as a sign to us when things were being said facetiously.

Lesson number nine: “Nose out of joint.” This was a favorite of hers especially if the administration made an unpopular decision. She would take that long, skinny finger of hers and push her nose all the way to the side and “humph” as she did it to show her displeasure. We usually knew to stand clear when she was in that mood.

Somewhere in all of this, we learned to sight-read music, sing with a beautiful tone and with musical understanding. She taught us life lessons through the text of the music as well. I remember vividly the text of Halsey Steven’s setting of “Like as a Culver” and how she related it to her marriage to Mr. Joe. To this day, that text has special meaning to me as it was fulfilled when Mr. Joe died and Melva, like the culver, was left to mourn.

Melva was always quick to help anyone who needed it especially young teachers. I know so many people in the choral field because she introduced me to them as a young teacher. All the great teachers of the state, many of whom have passed like Bill Cormack, Jim and Glenda Casey, Jim Sheppard, Ruth Whitlock, and the fine South Texas ladies, Aurelia Scoggins, Martha Luigi, and Lois Rhea Land.

Melva loved our profession especially Texas Choral Directors Association. She served as Secretary and then President of TCDA and later worked to get TMAA grounded. She encouraged many to serve the profession in leadership roles and

continued to guide them in her quiet way. But mostly, she helped to shape my life which in turn helped to shape the lives of my students. And isn't that what we are about, we music makers? Shaping lives? I miss her every day and many times hear her voice in my head reminding me of the life lessons.

Grace Littlefield

## Melva Sebesta Remembered By Jay Dunahoo

I first met Melva Sebesta in 1954. I was a 12<sup>th</sup> grade student at San Marcos High School and Melva Sebesta was the student teacher from Southwest Texas State Teachers College in our high school orchestra class. She was tall, graceful, and very pretty. I was young and a little bit of a trouble maker in class.

Melva did a fine job in maintaining discipline during our orchestra rehearsals, except I thought that she seemed to be singling me out a bit too much as if she thought that I might, at times, be up to no good. She was probably correct and I now think that she saw some potential in me and wanted to keep me pointed in the right direction.

During this time I played in a very popular country western band comprised of college and high school boys. We played all of the area night clubs and dance halls and had a rather large following. It was at a Saturday night dance at the Devils Backbone Tavern near Wimberley that Melva noticed I was playing in the band. During the week she was the prim and proper student teacher but I noticed that she was indeed a slightly different person when not in school and around her friends on a Saturday night. She loved to dance and she may have imbibed just a bit like the other college students attending such events. Regardless, Melva was having a very good time laughing and dancing and not acting at all like a teacher when she looked up on the bandstand and noticed that one of her Monday-Friday students was playing fiddle in the band.

After that, Melva and I had an understanding. She knew things about me and I knew things about her. This understanding grew into a wonderful friendship and mutual admiration over the years. I respect her even more deeply when I realize,

as executive secretary of TMAA, how she paved the way for my accepting the same position when she retired.

## Melva Sebesta Remembered By Xavier Barrera

I was privileged to have been her first student teacher in the spring of 1967 at Gregory-Portland. When she first came to Gregory-Portland (I want to say in 1957) she taught elementary music as well as starting the High School choir at Gregory-Portland. I was fortunate to have been hired at Gregory-Portland upon the completion of my student teaching and wound up assisting her as well as becoming responsible for the Junior High Choir program. We worked side by side for 10 years before I became the Assistant Principal at the Jr. High and then on to other administrative roles within the District. Beyond being close co-workers, she, her husband Joe, my wife, and I all became good and close friends over the years until they both passed away.

Mrs. Sebesta was an amazing educator on many levels and a unique person. She cared deeply for her students and was committed beyond belief to making them successful. She had an untiring work ethic and was a perfectionist in all that she did. She was a strong, positive role model constantly exhibiting class and proper, well mannered behavior while having a wonderful sense of humor. Adults today who had her as a teacher when they were in school still always speak of her with the utmost respect and admiration. She taught them to levels they did not realize they could attain. Some people would say that she "pushed" them. That may be so but my recollection was that she taught them to a higher level - I observed that first-hand. She was an amazing mentor to any and all who sought her wisdom in the teaching profession and would always share unselfishly.

The choral world was made better because of her contributions to students, and peers, through her music education. She really didn't teach choir; she used choir as a vehicle to teach young people life-long lessons of responsibility, self-discipline, work ethic, and care for others. Along the way, students learned how to sing choral literature - and sing it very well.

She and her groups earned many trophies, medals, and various awards in many many contests over the years - shelves and shelves of awards. But, in my mind, her greatest accomplishment was her impact on the lives of the young people with whom she came in contact. For those of us who were blessed enough to have had the opportunity to know her, we will always cherish her and her memory in the deepest reaches of our hearts.

Xavier Barrera  
Asst. Superintendent  
Gregory-Portland ISD

## A Tribute to Melva Sebesta By Alicia Dean

I began teaching with Melva Sebesta and Linda Mulder at Gregory-Portland in 1981. I was in my second year of teaching, young and brash, and still wet behind the ears. Our first duty together involved attending TCDA in the summer before I began teaching with them. At the time, I thought that the primary purpose of TCDA was as a reunion with one's college friends. Thus, after a strenuous first day of reading new music, on Thursday night I went to dinner with my TCU buddies. Around 10:00 or 11:00 when I arrived back at the room, Melva and Linda were sitting at a table with music spread on the beds and library lists in their laps. I somewhat flippantly asked, "Are ya'll still working?" Linda's eyebrows furrowed as she took a breath; but, before she could speak, Melva interrupted her, "Now Linda, she's young." It was the beginning of a journey on which I learned about a different kind of work ethic that demanded excellence and complete devotion to the tasks and joys of making music.

One particular day about a month before Concert and Sight Reading Contest, the electricity went out and our windowless choir room went pitch black in the middle of a men's choir rehearsal. However, Melva was not about to give up precious time. She quickly found a flashlight in order to keep time by swinging it back and forth while Linda and I made our way into the group to help squelch any potential chaos. After a few moments, she turned off the light and asked the kids to sing with their ears and their hearts. The Chordsmen listened to each other in a way that they had never done, singing beautiful phrases and staying in tempo with their own breathing. There

was no chaos in the dark that day. Instead, there were young men who, perhaps for the first time, heard the beauty of their voices resonant and full.

Melva believed strongly in the advantages of team teaching. Neither Linda nor I sat in the office or worked on other things while there was a class in session. All three of us were simultaneously engaged with different sections, or one of us was at the keyboard or in front of the class or quieting a student who was having a difficult day. Melva often took a place standing at the back of the room listening while one of us was in front of a choir. Once in the middle of a men's rehearsal, I looked up to see her standing in the bass section with her finger in her ear. When I looked at her inquisitively, she simply shook her head but said nothing. After class in the privacy of our office, she explained by telling a joke about an alien coming to earth and encountering gas pumps who he thought ruled the planet. When the alien returned home, he explained to his leader that the earthlings were not very smart and couldn't hear very well because they all stood around with certain male anatomical parts in their ears. The next day Melva was once more in the back of the room, this time in the midst of the tenors, with her finger in her ear and a mischievous smirk on her face.

Indeed, at times Melva was our comic relief. She worked hard but usually ended the day with a smile because she believed in the gifts that music offers us. She believed strongly in music literacy and assisting young men and women become responsible leaders. Melva was patient, but direct. She was a taskmaster and a cruise director. She was devoted to her students and to the integrity of the music. She was always willing to assist a colleague in whatever way possible. She had established an incredible program at Gregory-Portland for more years than I could imagine with superior ratings and sweepstakes awards, yet she was always open to the things that a young, brash colleague had to offer. Despite that first TCDA together, she treated me with respect and always listened to my musical and pedagogical opinions. I will always be grateful to Melva for the many things that she taught me about choral music education; but, more than anything, I am grateful for her open mind and open heart.

Alicia Dean  
Former Colleague and Friend

## Melva Sebesta Remembered By Dede Duson

Having never worked with her in any official capacity, my thoughts are of her wonderful sense of humor and obvious organizational abilities. I picture her bright eyes and smile, and loved one of her favorite phrases, "et cetera and so forth!" And of course we all remember her devotion to loving husband, Joe.

## Melva Sebesta Remember By Kathy Ginn Riley

When I think of Mrs. Sebesta, of course, "choir" comes to mind. But, I learned so much more from Melva Lou Sebesta than just music...so many "life lessons!" It sounds petty; but, one thing is to be on time!!! Don't walk in the door at the assigned time; but, be "on-task" at the assigned time. There are quite a few people who have worked for me, over the years, that wish I hadn't learned that!!

Another thing is...make the best decision you can, with the information you have, and don't apologize for that decision!

I truly have so much respect for MLS! She was just so much fun!! I remember one contest, when she didn't really like the way things were going, when she announced, "I'm going to powder my nose and anything else that's chapped!"

My life is definitely better because Melva Sebesta was part of it.

Kathy Ginn Riley  
Former GPHS Choraleir

## Melva Sebesta...A Force! By Rosemary Heffley

Early on recollections of Melva Sebesta, as with so many of our legends, are at professional convention settings...especially TCDA. She was front-and-center at every session but especially at the business meeting, which in those days, were well-attended and vitally important to all involved. In that no-nonsense manner

with clipped tones and “extremely” long sentences her points would be made... (albeit, sometimes confusing those of us with less understanding!). “Robert’s Rules of Order” were never in better hands (or mouths) than with our Melva!

Later, after her election as the first female TCDA leader, our board sessions were amazing events. Melva ran those marathons with poise, discipline, and militaristic efficiency, shepherding what would have been described as a somewhat slipshod organization at that time toward a more mature, dependable one. It took time yet she nurtured us all and most definitely rerouted the philosophy and direction...all with that inimitable style. It was an adventure!

Being a young, very green teacher in the late ‘60’s, early ‘70’s the mentorship and guidance of those “South Texas ladies” --- Lois Rhea Land, Aurelia Scogin, Millicent Wiley, Martha Luigi, Melva, and others --- were true beacons of professionalism (and each was their own character, I might add, which made it even more of an experience!!). They exuded confidence and musicianship demonstrating that quality teaching and music-making, especially as the secondary level, wasn’t just left to “the men!”

Friendship with Melva and Joe solidified and flourished well past their retirement from Gregory-Portland ISD. They were so highly respected...two fine, upstanding people who put their best efforts (and they were mighty) toward helping the youth of the area. Melva’s choirs were the epitome of discipline. Even their stage entrances and exits were the stuff of legend...details down to the girl’s hair styles!... We all marveled, yet realizing the depth of her desire for and quest of excellence, understood and applauded.

She was a force, much beloved, impacting not only so many students’ lives, but the integrity of our profession. She was my friend....

## Melva Sebesta Remembered By Georia Kornegay

I have so many thoughts about Melva that I hardly know where to begin.

The first time I ever saw her work was my first year to teach, 1978. I traveled with middle school students from College Station to SWTSU in San Marcos for Region

Choir Clinic. Melva was the clinician. As a first year teacher, I was totally amazed at her musical skill, teaching techniques, and obvious rapport with the students – students she had never met until that day. She was hilarious with them and they were eating it up. Observing her was the highlight of my first year.

A second thought I had upon reading your letter was how personal Melva made every correspondence as TMAA secretary. Each time I would receive my dues notice, Melva would write a personal note on the notice. Her wording always indicated that she knew exactly who I was and that we were the best of friends. It wasn't pretentious or "PC" at all – it was pure Melva.

Thirdly, I have a "Melva story" regarding her judging one of my choirs. The year was 1993, and the UIL choir was a group of 7<sup>th</sup> grade girls. One member of the choir was a hypochondriac who "never" felt well. Before we went into the sight reading room, where Melva was judging, the girl said she felt sick. To me, it was the boy crying "wolf" one more time, and I told her she would be fine. During the first reading, the young lady, who was on the front row, threw up, all over the floor (carpet), and directly in front of the judges. While we continued to sing, Melva levitated over the judges' table and helped the student sit down and put her head between her knees. After the first reading, Melva got paper towels and CLEANED UP the mess so the girls would not have to see or smell it during the second reading. In addition to cleaning, she escorted the student outside and got her a glass of water. Melva ultimately returned for the second reading, but only after she found an adult to tend to my student. All that, AND she scored my choir accurately. Melva is my heroine.

## Melva Sebesta Remembered By V.J. Lowrance

I first met Melva Sebesta on the telephone! Right out of college, I had been hired as a first choir director by a little 3-A high school near Corpus Christi – Calallen. One day early on the band director and I were visiting and he mentioned that he had not seen me at the Region meeting the previous day. I explained that I did not know about the meeting or that there even was a Region. To help me get started he volunteered to give me the Region Vocal Chairman's name and number. I

proceeded to make what turned out to be a very memorable call and found myself talking with Melva Sebesta.

She was so sweet and kind to me as she attempted to get me up to speed on the activities of the Region, especially the first round of All-State Choir try-outs. I remember her patience as she went through all the procedures –several times. I also remember how overwhelmed I felt at the prospect of becoming involved with the Region Choir try-outs, in the light of the fact that I did not have even one student who could sing the entire major scale up and down maintaining a single tonality. This began a long and special friendship. Before our conversation ended, she had offered to help me in any way she could with whatever problems I may have. I really appreciated this and felt that I now had someone to shelter me from the storms.

Years later, after judging our choirs at Seguin High School at UIL contest in the sight-reading room, she encouraged me to select a system for teaching sight-reading and get with it and stay with it to help us turn the corner on sight-reading. Just what we needed.

Then, even more years later, I was elected president of TMAA and discovered that our organization was doing business out of two giant card-board boxes. Melva had just been selected as TMAA's first Executive Secretary. She and I and the Executive Board took on the task of running the business of our organization as proficiently as we fostered the professionalism of our judging members. Melva worked tirelessly to get us computerized and organized. Her successor, Jay Dunahoo has built on the work she started and forged a business procedure that our organization can be proud of.

So, Melva has been there to help me in all the stages of my development and growth as a musician and choral director. These remembrances are just a drop in the bucket to all the forty years of association that I have had with Melva. I'm sure there are many around the state that have had similar associations with her. I just wanted to share these and say that I truly admired, respected, and loved her. Thank you, Melva!!

## Melva Sebesta – Never Will There Be Another Like Her By Molly Jackson Owen

When I heard that TMAA was going to pay tribute to the years that Melva Sebesta served as their President, I felt compelled to share my experience with one of the greatest master teachers with whom I've ever had the privilege to work.

I was fortunate enough to student teach with Mrs. Sebesta in 1978 at Gregory Portland High School.

To say that Melva had her own style of teaching is not news to anyone who knew her. Her stature was tall and thin, but when she spoke, there was no question of her strength. With every word she spoke to her students, she was molding their minds to be self-motivated leaders and independent singers. A great tradition of excellence is what followed for years in Gregory-Portland ISD. Concerts began at 6:37 p.m, girls all wore their hair the same way, hems of dresses were measured, and woe be to any young man who wasn't in complete uniform.

During the time I student taught with her, Linda Mulder joined Melva in what would become a team teaching atmosphere. After having taught many years on her own as the only director in her program, Melva could have felt threatened, but being true to her nature, she gracefully welcomed Linda to be a part of the GPISD choral program. As a young director, this struck me as a very professional and positive step to take.

Mrs. Sebesta gave me no "free ride" in my student teaching. There was many a day that I wished my car would drive off the large Corpus Christi harbor bridge on the way to Gregory-Portland! There were many late afternoon/early evening chats on how I could improve my teaching style. I feared her, but respected her so much.

Although most folks saw only the serious, business-like choral director in Melva, she had a sense of humor that left you melting on the floor in laughter, most of the time with the students having no clue as to what was said or done! If I had one wish, it would be that I could have been one of her colleagues just to be able to see more of that Sebesta humor!

I am very proud to say that professionally, I have come “full-circle”, and am now a choral director in Gregory-Portland, teaching in that very same classroom where I learned so much from Mrs. Sebesta. There’s not a day that goes by that I don’t think of her and hope that I’m living up to her expectations!

Molly Jackson Owen  
Director of Choirs  
Gregory-Portland Int. & Junior High School

## Melva Sebesta Remembered By Michael Petrisky

Once upon a time I had the pleasure of judging with Melva Sebesta on a UIL Concert panel in Dallas.

After Liz Volk’s choirs had sung that day, she was taking Melva and me somewhere that afternoon after the last choir had finished. Liz pulled into a gas station for fuel. When she was getting out of the car (remembering my early youth when an attendant used to service your vehicle while he pumped gas), I said, “Check your fluids, ma’am?”

Liz turned white as a sheet, and Melva about fell out of the back seat laughing. Liz asked me to repeat the question, and I did, which led to both buckling. I then explained the question about checking her fluids, and all seemed to settle...until, once Liz got back in the car to leave...this little, smirky voice came from Melva in the back seat...”He didn’t ask to check MY fluids!”

Needless, we held up the line at the station for several minutes until all of us could regain a little composure.

Melva was Melva. Her professionalism guided TMAA through some tricky waters. I was privileged to serve two terms on the TMAA *Committee on Standards of Adjudication and Practices* while she was Executive Secretary. We are all fortunate to have had her vision, wit, and wisdom be a part of choral music education, and TMAA.

## Melva Sebesta Remembered

### By Sally Schott

Melva Sebesta lived as she encouraged others to live: consistently productive, efficient, virtuous, energetic, reliable, self-effacing, disciplined, generous, helpful, and inspiring. She was all that and so much more. Her legacy endures in the lives of her students, her colleagues and in the professional organizations she served.

A truly unique individual, she developed a choral program in Gregory-Portland which was a reflection of her personal strength, her values and her strong ability to guide young people at a very formative time of their lives. At UIL contests, Gregory-Portland choirs reflected her insistence on a degree of precision that would be the envy of a Marine drill team. The perfect order reflected in the entrance and exit from the risers, the alignment of singers and their total focus was a direct result of her determined influence. A first-time adjudicator in the sight reading room could not help but gasp at the military precision of the Gregory-Portland singers as well as their intense focus on the task at hand. Melva's choirs responded to "open your music" with a group "whoosh" that was a sight to behold. No choreographer could surpass the total unity Melva attained when each and every singer, holding their sight reading music at a precise angle, opened their music at exactly the same time. Melva's ability to motivate her students to attain such a degree of unity was unsurpassed then as it is today. One can only imagine how that well-ordered behavior has served all who came under her influence. Her insistence on focus and discipline surely equipped her students to meet the challenges they would face as adults.

Melva Sebesta was a builder. As treasurer, she literally brought the Texas Choral Directors Association to an entirely new stage of development, establishing a bookkeeping system as orderly as the department of her choirs at contest. She continued her leadership as president of the organization. The opportunity to do the same for the Texas Music Adjudicator's Association once again revealed Melva's organizational skills as she developed a system of accountability that is the foundation of today's thriving organization.

As a young teacher, I was both inspired and informed by Melva. The consummate professional, she was generous in encouraging others and in sharing information.

She was truly a pathfinder, trained in instrumental music but choosing to devote the majority of her career to promoting and teaching choral music. She excelled at organizational work in a male-dominated world, and paved the way for others who would find a much easier path to leadership roles.

No one on this earth could shift from the tone and demeanor of British aristocracy to a Minnie Pearl "howdy" as swiftly as Melva Sebesta. Endlessly fascinating, she used her complexity to good advantage as she encouraged generations of students and colleagues to excel. No matter how serious the situation, Melva's ability to inject humor at the most unexpected times was simply one more gift a wise and accomplished woman offered to all those who were blessed to know and work with her.

## Melva Sebesta Remembered By Ken Steele

This is the funniest story about Melva that I've ever heard.

Melva could be really blunt at times, to say the least! Once when her basses were not singing with the depth of tone and focus that she wanted, she trooped them all outside the choir room. With the fire in her eyes and her finger wagging, she said, "Either sing like you have [testicles], or go put on a dress!" Needless to say, their sound improved immediately!