

Obituary of Mary Jane Zollinger Byers

Mary Jane Zollinger Byers, 94, passed peacefully at home among family and friends on January 13, 2021 in Boulder, Colorado.

She was born on September 26, 1926 in Junction City, Kansas to Charles and Mary Zollinger. Nicknamed Cookie, she and her brother, Joe Zollinger, were well known for having fun and their wonderful singing voices. They could be heard throughout the town calling each other home with the tarzan call (she would say this was how she learned to yodel) as well as advertising for their fathers veterinarian clinic by imitating animals (this is where Jane's famous chicken cluck came from).

When Junction City was having a variety evening or a talent show, the Zollinger family was always involved, singing either in a group or solo often doing humorous skits. Mary Jane wrote many of these as well as poetry and short stories, which were frequently published in the city's newspaper.

Even at a young age, Jane entered various music competitions for voice and piano. She received high marks for her talent. When she didn't she would not take the criticism personally but as a guide to how she could get better.

Mary Jane was a Fine Arts major at the University of Kansas. Known on campus as "Zollie" she received the nickname "Character". It was said that she could say anything and get a laugh. She was treasurer of the A-Cappella choir, social chairman and song leader of Locksley hall (where she also lived until her senior year), a member of the Jay Jane's Independent Students' association, a member of Sigma Alpha Iota (SAI - a women's music fraternity), All-Student council, and always participated in intramural sports. Her voice lessons with Mrs Alice Moncrieff were the highlight of her studies.

At the beginning of her junior year, a new accompanist was playing for her voice lessons and she became smitten (as she put it) "with not only his talent but his good looks." The summer before her senior year (1947), she married Charles Albert Byers. After graduation, they received an invitation from Fred Waring and Robert Shaw to come and join their summer choral program. Shaw immediately began recruiting Jane for the alto soloist position for his choir. After much consideration, the young couple decided that starting a family was a priority so they moved to Coffeyville, KS where Charles took on a teaching position at the local High School. Jane taught voice lessons and school music at the Junior High School. In 1953 came their first child, Timothy Joel, into the world.

In 1954 Warner Imig called Charles to the University of Colorado's School of Music in Boulder. Already expecting their second child, Jeffery Leroy, they moved to Boulder and Jane began establishing herself as a singer and voice teacher. A year and a half later Rebecca Jane came into their lives followed 10 years later by Mary Margaret "Mardi".

Mary Jane's contralto voice was a vibrant part of the music community in Boulder. She was a member of various music groups including the Tuesday Morning music group and The Faculty Wives Music group. She sang in several operas including Katisha in *The Mikado* by Gilbert and Sullivan (conducted by Charles) and *The Secretary* in Menotti's *Counsel*. She was a frequent concert soloist singing Handel's *Messiah*, Cecil Effingers *The Saint Luke's Christmas Story*, and, of course, Beethoven's *Fifth Symphony* (with Robert Shaw) in Colorado, Kansas, and Nebraska. Jane was always Robert Shaw's alto soloist when he came to town.

Mary Jane was mostly known for her folk song singing, accompanying herself on the autoharp. Her song repertoire went from John Jacob Niles folk songs, familiar tunes like the Riddle Song, and of course character songs such as the *The Deceitful Man* ("I can tell the men off in that one, you know!") and *The Mountain Girls Lament* with its frequent yodels. Perhaps her favorite and most beloved was the spiritual *Sweet Little Jesus Boy*. This was the most requested song from her community and friends. She sang this on 3 separate online holiday get-togethers and for church this last December before she passed..

Jane loved her social clubs. She was a member of the University Wives Club where she was often a model for their fashion shows. She continued to be a contributing member of SAI, Delta Kappa Gamma society, and was a member of the PEO Chapter EI. Both Chuck and Jane were committed members of the First Christian Church (now Cairn Christian Church) and were both very involved in the music there. She continued to sing church solos and duets with her daughter, Mardi, until shortly before she passed. Jane was a well known voice teacher. Her belief was "If you want to sing, then sing!" Her studio was known to take anyone with a simple desire, fantastic young talent, and all those in between. When taking students to various competitions in the area, whispers of disappointment from the other teachers could be heard as her "kids" usually swept the prizes. Every spring was busy with student recitals. She continued doing these until she was 92. She gave her last lesson only weeks before her death.

In 1984 Mardi left home to attend Arizona State University's music school; Chuck retired in 1985, and the couple became snowbirds in Mesa, Arizona.

They enjoyed all sorts of creative outlets including music and ceramics as well as golf, swimming, and just hanging around with all their friends - new and those from the past who were also in Mesa. Their gardens in Arizona took on a different flare to those in Colorado with cactus' replacing columbines. Jane's vocal talents were much loved in Mesa. She was regularly asked to sing for events (often as a duet with Chuck) and performed Aunt Eller 2 times in Monte Vista's productions of Oklahoma. She continued to teach every other week, flying back and forth to Boulder and having her students sing in recitals every spring.

Jane loved to travel the world to see her family and friends. She and Chuck visited Europe several times. Switzerland became a favorite as both Jeff and Mardi settled there. When Chuck passed, she even travelled alone to Moscow, Russia to hear Mardi sing at the Bolshoi Theater. She was often seen driving in her DIVA mobile, Boston Terrier at her side - oh how she loved her dogs! Jane was always looking for the positive in life. She will be missed by many.

Mary Jane's family spans the globe. She is survived by her son Timothy Byers (Sally), daughters Rebecca Byers Norton (Ken) and Mary Margaret "Mardi" Byers, 6 grandchildren - Christie Brown, Rachel DeBenedictis, Michael and Zachary Byers Norton, Sebastien and Nicolas Byers, and 6 great grandchildren - Thadeus, Andrew, Nick, and Lauren Legg, Sophia and Christian DeBenedictis. Her husband Charles Byers (2006) and son Jeffery Byers (2015) preceded her in death.

Contributions can be made to The Byers Music Educational Scholarship, checks payable to the University of Colorado Foundation, fund #0150954 (memo line) and sent to PO Box 17126, Denver, Colorado 80217. A celebration of life ceremony is being planned for this summer.