

“The One Who Got Away”
in loving memory of
Delores Bruch Cannon
(1934-2012)

In April 2002, during the final springtime of his life, Fred Rogers (“Mr. Rogers”) delivered a speech at the University Park campus of Penn State University to honor the 50th anniversary of public television. The large lecture hall, with its seating capacity of several hundred, was packed completely full of persons of all ages, from babes in arms to elderly admirers. Toward the end of his speech, Mr. Rogers called for a moment of silence, during which he asked us to close our eyes and to think of the persons in our lives who had especially helped us—including our teachers. As the seconds passed, the silence gave way to the sounds of dozens of throats clearing, noses sniffing, and tissue packs rustling in a communal wave of individual gratitude and grief. And in that wave of memories, Delores Bruch Cannon, one of my two beloved teachers and mentors and my primary coach at the University of Iowa, quickly came to mind. Exactly ten years and six months to the day later, Delores died. Her service took place at a funeral home in her hometown of Independence, MO with another of her former students and I serving as officiant and pianist, respectively.

A year before Delores’s death, I was granted a semester-long sabbatical leave from William Jewell College to launch an oral history project titled “Conversations and Legacies: Exploring late 20th century American organ pedagogy through oral history.” Among the persons that I have been so very fortunate to interview are women who have been powerhouses within the profession and supporters of Musforum; Wilma Jensen, our keynote speaker for the 2017 conference in Omaha, is a prime example. I think it highly probable that Delores would have been an enthusiastic participant in and contributor to Musforum, had her health allowed her to do so. She certainly would have been at the top of my list of persons to interview for the oral history project. But those developments came too late for her. During the last six years of her life spent at a care facility in Lee’s Summit, MO, Delores gradually lost both the power of speech and control of her body. Her responsiveness gradually faded, yet the nature of her illness was such that she likely retained far greater command of her intellect than what was at all apparent from observing her. A formidably bright and exceptionally articulate person, and a former English teacher who wrote and spoke with power and eloquence, Delores may well have found her loss of communication skills to be the most galling aspect of her final years. She still had so much to say—and, remarkably, she retained her graciousness of speech and manner even as her longest sentences dwindled to a mere handful of syllables. Her illness tragically robbed us all of her personal treasure trove of experiences as teacher, student, organist, church musician, faculty member, administrator, contributor to professional organizations, organ consultant, world traveler, devoted mother and mother-in-law, doting grandmother, and loving spouse. She is one who got away.

Delores was part of a cohort of women whom our profession proudly recognizes and admires— and whom young colleagues overlook at their peril. This cohort, whose own young

lives were shaped by the Great Depression, the Second World War, and American society of the 1950s, made possible the careers and life choices of all of the rest of us today, from those approaching retirement to those approaching their senior recitals, and everyone in between. Delores's contemporaries were, and in many cases still are, true forces of Nature, to borrow a cliché. Her cohort personified determination, persistence, and resilience. Socialized to marry young, to center their energies on home and family, and to sacrifice their own talents and ambitions, they managed nonetheless to integrate their personal and professional lives in ways for which they had no models to follow and typically no female mentors to lead them. They had to improvise, to figure things out as they went along. Pursuit of their dreams came at significant cost, and their achievements were hard-won. Long days stretched into equally long nights as they simultaneously juggled full-time work, completion of advanced degrees, concertizing, and family responsibilities. Marriages were transformed, leading either to stronger partnerships or to life-preserving separations. ("How did you hold it all together?" I incredulously asked one colleague. She pointed to the kitchen door, through which her husband had just left the house. "You just met him," she replied. Another colleague, recalling her divorce, shook her head and chuckled ruefully: "Best decision I ever made.") Relationships with children were both strained and strengthened by the complex dynamics of maternal roles and family systems in transition, especially during the 1970s. The proverbial glass ceiling was set low as these women began their professional lives, yet they watched that ceiling rise as they pushed it higher. As concert artists, teachers, and church musicians, they fought for and won their place on the bench; as members of professional organizations and as administrators, they fought for and won their place at the table of policy-making and power. When circumstances forced them to adapt to painful disappointments such as lost jobs, compromised health, missed opportunities, and shattered dreams, they made the best of their situations and, in many cases, they remade themselves. In their quest to confront and eliminate barriers to their success, they laid the foundation for the options and choices that we, their students and their students' students, enjoy and even take for granted today. Their successes and sacrifices deserve to be remembered and respected now in ways that will allow future generations of organists to recognize how Delores and her cohort shaped our profession.

As I recall my own study and friendship with Delores, and as I think about the oral history interviews that I have been so fortunate to conduct, there emerge some themes that are held in common by the men and women alike. Primary among these is a profound sense of gratitude. These individuals realize that their lives just happened to coincide with one of history's richest and most dynamic periods for organ study and performance. As students and later as teachers, they were able to capitalize on developments in the areas of organ building, performance practices, and pedagogy through conference attendance, international travel, and increasingly sophisticated recording technology. Much of their training occurred during the 1960s, when the professional skills and aesthetic sensibilities of highly trained organists were more widely valued and cultivated than they are today. Our colleagues' timing was propitious, and they have always known how fortunate they were. To be sure, the labor market and social

mores conspired against full equality for women organists, and equal opportunity for all remains an elusive goal within some sectors of our profession even today. Still, the women whom I interviewed conspicuously withheld charges of sexism; as one recalled of her first academic appointment, "I was never held back...I always felt supported."

In addition to gratitude as a dominant theme of the interviews, our conversations consistently turned to the topics of improvisation and relationships with students. Many of our colleagues, notably the women in particular, expressed regret that improvisation at the organ was never emphasized in their training, so they never became comfortable with it—but that was the sole regret mentioned repeatedly in our discussions. As a group, this cohort is just not regretful. They are thankful for having had rich, fulfilling lives—"good runs," as many of them said—and they have remained professionally interested and active to the extent that their health has permitted. Their sense of satisfaction with their professional lives rests, in great measure, in their abiding love for their students. And love is not too strong a word to use. Delores placed great stock in her relationships with her students. She loved them, she knew that they loved her in return, and it seemed to be very important to her that her former students, as teachers themselves, should be loved by their own students. During her last years, a number of her former students made what amounted to a pilgrimage to Lee's Summit to say their good-byes, to leave with her a CD or a card or some other token of their affection, and to remind her that she was loved. Thankfully, Delores got that message before she "got away."

Is there a Delores in your life, someone whose wisdom and stories and insights and humor you want to experience and possibly to preserve before that individual "gets away" forever? At the time of this writing, restrictions on social interactions and travel due to the COVID-19 pandemic preclude the kinds of conversations and documentation that would have been possible a year ago. The pandemic has also accelerated losses within our profession, not only in terms of jobs and performance opportunities, but also in terms of souls; not since the AIDS epidemic have our professional journals reported so many deaths within our ranks each month. Now is the time to connect with those persons in your life who have especially helped you, the persons who would have come to mind had you been there in that lecture hall at Penn State to hear Mr. Rogers speak. Write to those individuals so that they can read and re-read and read again your message of appreciation. Don't let those persons get away before you have let them know that they helped you, that they have mattered in your life, and that you will always remember them with gratitude and love.