

Unsung Heroes: Songs of Rondout Valley's elder farmers in the spotlight

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BSP Reporter

When multimodal healing professional Colette Ruoff of Rosendale founded SageArts, it was with the vision of bringing the wisdom of community elders into the limelight. That wisdom, turned into song by master musicians, is coming to the Rondout Valley High School stage later this month in the group's second major event.

"Elders have valuable, instructive stories to share," Ruoff said. "There is a nourishing depth of life experience they can offer. And they get marginalized as 'has beens,' treated as irrelevant, put away. Their own families often care, but no one else is listening. I wanted to find a way to shift the conversation and bring out their stories."

On a 2012 trip to New Mexico, Ruoff experienced a program called "Life Songs" that had been bringing experienced citizens together with singer/songwriters for five years. "That planted a seed," she said. SageArts was founded in 2014 as a 501(c)3 nonprofit "intergenerational arts project that promotes social inclusion and dignity for elders in our community."

Very quickly, Ruoff realized that she and her core group of songwriters, artists and hospice workers were onto something. Enthusiastic support came pouring in from all over the area. In spring 2015, SageArts produced their first-ever concert at the RVHS auditorium.

"It was packed," said Ruoff. "Standing room only. And in the process of preparing it, I became aware that we had an opportunity to use our program to highlight particular groups of elders, rather than just elders at random."

Farmers were a natural choice, as the Rondout Valley Growers Association immediately and wholeheartedly agreed. "It was a great opportunity to collaborate with another nonprofit, which we hadn't done yet," said Ruoff, "and a way to highlight a group that has made such an essential contribution. We worked together really well. They helped identify senior farmers who might be willing to participate."

"These were people who had not had a lot of exposure prior to this," Ruoff said, "very independent people, some very expressive by nature, some not. Farmers are all about being on the land and doing. They tend to be modest, private souls who keep things in the family circle, not necessarily inclined to jump at the chance for public exposure. But when we approached



Farmer Wayne Kelder at the wheel of his "doodlebug."

them about the importance of elevating the role of the farmer in the community and of sharing their knowledge and expertise, that was attractive to them."

Five men and two women -- Jackie Brooks, Frank Coddington, Wayne Kelder, Rima Nickell, Jack Schoonmaker, Abe Waruch and Bill Wiklow -- collaborated with songwriters Heather Masse, Mark Brown, Kelleigh McKenzie, Tom Holland and Vickie Russell, who have all been trained in the Life Song methodology of getting elders to open up and tell their tales.

"We are lucky to have musicians with years of experience, people who have mastered their craft, who are really interested in elders and have the listening skills to make a lot of space for another person to unfold their story," said Ruoff. "We taught them how to use prompts to get into sense memory and get detail."

Rondout Valley School District officials and staff have embraced the concept, a natural, especially since the district has been highlighting agriculture and working closely with the RVGA over the past couple of years. "When we reached out to (superintendent of schools) Rosario Agostaro, he was very excited by the opportunity to host this event. They redid their 500-seat auditorium recently, and it's really lovely," said Ruoff. "They have been so accommodating, letting us use that space and the cafeteria for the reception; the only thing they are charging us for is the custodian."

"Art teacher Whitney Burns, whose class did the amazing sets for 'Once Upon a Mattress,' has her class working on a set using sketches and symbols of farming through the past century. The high school choir director, Dr. Barbara Wild, is very involved, and a community service club led by Frannie Hertz is doing setup, ushering and cleanup. And one of Frannie's students in the WISE program, Ayla Stansberry, is interviewing the songwriters to find out how the experience affects them

and interviewing the audience; she's going to write a paper that we plan to publish."

When SageArts first got started, Ruoff wasn't sure where funding was going to come from. She's extremely gratified to find that others believe in the work: Last year's concert netted \$2,000 and also sparked a sizeable anonymous donation through the Rudolf Steiner Social Fund. "That felt like a miracle, and we wanted to demonstrate that we could match it," she said. "And we did. We got grants from Arts MidHudson, Ulster Alive, and Ulster Savings Bank."

Ruoff couldn't be more pleased with the intergenerational, communal way things are coming together; it's exactly what SageArts intends. Noted musical director Ralph Legnini of E-Boy Music in Woodstock is coordinating the show, weaving in songwriters, young choir singers, and a backup band. (Ruoff hints at some big names, but can't say who just yet.)

"I can promise a really good show," she said. "What we do is take a half-hour reception break halfway through, and people get a chance to unwind and talk and laugh; last year, people were actually bursting into song and dance in the cafeteria."

So come on out to the high school on April 24 for a melodious dose of living Rondout Valley history. Doors open at 3 p.m., and music starts at 3:30 and continues till 6 p.m.; you can get tickets in advance (a good idea) at sagearts.org or by calling 1-800-838-3006. **BSP**

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