



Broadway To Vegas



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HELLO, MOMMY

When opera singer Nancy Evans staged her recent - June 13-28 - musical comedy show *Love with a Twist* at The Theatre at Saint Peter's Church in Manhattan, one audience member was of particular interest to Nancy - her 25-year old daughter, Heather.

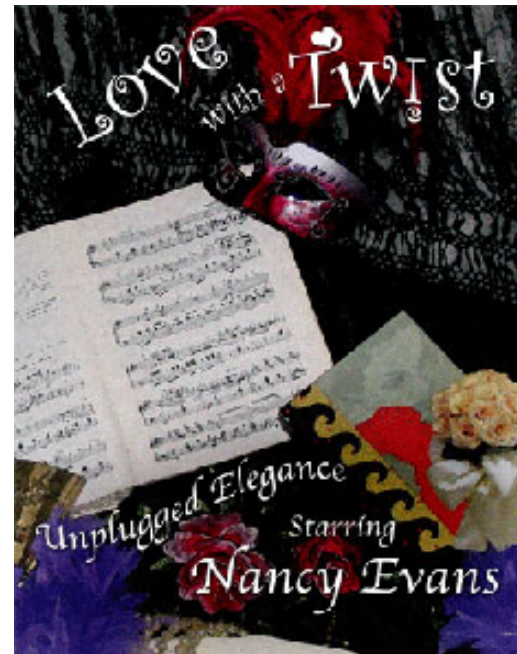
"She laughed at all the right moments, applauded appropriately and had a fabulous time," the proud mother told Broadway To Vegas in discussing how important music therapy has been to her special needs daughter.

Music therapy was something opera singer Nancy Evans never thought about.

The Virginia born and raised dramatic soprano graduated from Carnegie Mellon University. It was there she met and married her husband Peter S. Saretsky, a CPA who began his career in public accounting at Arthur Young & Co. (now Ernst & Young). He received both his BS and an MBA in Finance from Carnegie-Mellon University. Formerly with IBM Corporation where he most recently led the finance function for IBM's Global Telecommunications and Media division. Before joining IBM, Mr. Saretsky spent over 20 years at American Express Company, where he held a wide range of financial positions, and fulfilled a variety of CFO responsibilities, including two international assignments.

"In college I met a young man from New York," said Nancy. "We dated and then got married and moved to New York. I got to London because of my husband who worked for American Express. He was the Chief Financial Officer for the region, so he was in charge of the UK."

The Saretsky family was sitting pretty. They had a marvelous two year old son, Jason, and Nancy was pregnant.



"It was an uneventful pregnancy," Nancy told Broadway To Vegas remembering the time 25-years ago when she was eagerly anticipating the birth of daughter, Heather, while starring in the Mozart opera *Così Fan Tutti*.

"When Heather was first born she was perfectly normal," Nancy softly related. "Unfortunately, at 21 days, she had epileptic seizures on her entire left side. Then each month after that she had a different type of seizure. When she was five months old she was diagnosed with a horrendous disease that happens to one in 5,000 children - called infantile spasms. Hypsarrhythmia is the name for the pattern on the EEG. That is how they know it is infantile spasms. It means that the entire brain is seizing. It was quite scary. It was horrible! They clinically called it developmentally delayed and epilepsy."

"They never could find out the ideology - never could understand *why* - the seizures."

"When Heather became ill we decided that we would have no expectations for her. So, even it was just a smile - we'd rejoice in that."



Jason and Heather. Photo courtesy Nancy Evans

"Also, because Jason was so young, we instilled in him that she was his sister. She was not going to be treated differently. We took her to restaurants. We took her out. When she got older we took her to musicals. He played with her and if she messed up his toys, it was the same sibling arguments - Mommy, she's playing with my toys, make her go away," she recalled with a laugh.

"Early on we realized that music had an effect on her."

"One time we were on vacation and Heather was having a rough time. I was reading her a story that she loved. I must have read it to her five times. I wasn't sure about her, but I was getting a little bored. So, I then sang it as an opera. Then I sang it as a jazz reading and then as a musical comedy person. And, don't you know, she calmed right down," Nancy laughed.

It's a bedtime reading suggestion that many parents might try.

Introducing Heather to music therapy came early.

"When we lived in London I had her at the Nordoff Robbins Center and they have a branch at NYU, It was started by two gentlemen Mr. Nordoff and Mr. Robbins - one was a Special Ed teacher and one was a musician. They got together and tried to figure out how music could be used as a therapy with people who were not being helped by any other therapy."

While horror stories have been reported regarding parents crossing country borders with a handicapped children, Evans reported only positive experiences.

"People have been lovely. It really brings out the kindness in people. She is a love. She is very social. She cannot speak. She has a language issue which a lot of autistic children have, although she is not termed autistic. She is very social. She makes eye contact and she makes sure she shakes your hand. She is able to use communication devices. But, she has a bad tremor. She has Ataxic cerebral palsy and while she can walk she has a very bad tremor so she needs constant care. Unfortunately, even though she

understands almost everything, she can't do for herself."

The Nordoff-Robbins approach to creative music therapy is based upon the belief that there is an inborn musicality residing in every human being that can be activated in the service of personal growth and development. This self-actualizing potential is most effectively awakened through the use of improvisational music in which the individual's innate creativity is used to overcome emotional, physical, and cognitive difficulties.

In this form of co-creative endeavor, clients take an active role in creating music together with their therapists on a variety of standard and specialized instruments. Because instruments can be chosen which are expressively gratifying yet do not require special skills to play, no prior experience or training in music is required of clients.

Nordoff-Robbins therapists work worldwide with a broad range of people, including disabled children, individuals under psychiatric care, self-referred adults seeking a creative approach to emotional difficulties or personal development, and individuals with medical problems and in geriatric care. In all of its applications this work emphasizes the potency of individualized musical experiences as a means of developing relationship and the inner resources of clients. Spontaneous, clinically directed musicianship is combined with a humanistic concern for the needs and growth potential of the individual in overcoming the barriers to a more gratifying life imposed by disability, disease and trauma. Music and musical experience are the primary areas in which the therapist intervenes and in which the client's development takes place.



Nordoff Robbins Center. Photo
Nordoff Robbins

Facilities dedicated to its application exist in the United States, Great Britain, Germany, Australia, and Scotland and an organization devoted to its study exists in Japan. In all of its forms, the practice is both artistic and scientific: artistic in the creativity and aesthetic sensitivity with which therapists create music to meet individual client needs; scientific in the thoroughness with which the tape recording of each session is studied and documented to effect ongoing assessment and treatment planning.

"Music has the power to reach any human condition," stressed Nancy. ([See Broadway To Vegas column of October 24, 2004](#)) "Whereas physical therapy is just working on the physical, and speech therapy is maybe just working on the speech, music would be able to work on the emotional, physical, the intellectual - any phase of the human condition."

"Since 1998 Heather she has been at a residential facility called The Center for Discovery in Harris, N. Y.," related Nancy about the pediatric and adult facility - a facility where Heather will live for the rest of her life.

"It is fabulous," responded Nancy about the importance for parents to know that their child will always receive proper care.

"Those are exactly the fears that we lived with," confessed Nancy.



**Greenhouse at Thanksgiving Farm.
Photo Center for Discovery**

"We were extremely lucky we found this place and it is beautiful. They have an organic farm, a bakery and a stable. They have riding for the disabled. They have a swimming pool. They have just started another farm where they are working with autistic children."

"They have received some federal grants to do work with autism as well," she reported.

However, states are not always as eager to fund music therapy as they are other forms of treatment. Nancy performs benefit concerts for the facility four times a year.

A portion of the proceeds from Evans' *Love With a Twist* show at the Theatre at Saint Peter's went towards the Music Therapy Program at the Center For Discovery. For the past several years Nancy has actively helped fundraising for the Center. Over the past three years she has aggressively raised over \$100,000 to fund the music therapy program.



Residents and animals enjoy each other's company at Thanksgiving Farm. Photo; Center for Discovery

"One of the reasons we started raising money for music therapy is because, when Heather moved into the adult side, they didn't have music therapy because the state wouldn't pay for it," she explained. "That is why most schools don't have a music therapist on staff. Music therapy is usually a private therapy that a parent will choose to go to and pay for."

"When we first got there in 1998 they had two music therapists. They added interns. You are allowed to have an intern for every two therapists. Now they have six music therapists."

"Then they started to do music in the houses before dinner time - classical, jazz - different things to see if the kids would calm down before eating. A lot of these kids can't wait. They have to be fed at a certain time and some can't chew. They have every disability you can imagine. Originally, it was a medically fragile facility, so you have a tremendous amount of the population in wheelchairs and on feeding tubes. Their food has to be processed a certain way. And, children get hungry because they are children. They are impatient. Even though they may not be able to talk or run, they let you know that they want to eat."

The facility is divided into an adult section and a pediatric side where the child stays until they are 21 "Heather is in a house with six other young adults. There is a ten-year age span. The first house she was in housed 12. They found that was too large, so they are building smaller houses."

"Heather is fantastic," emphasized her mother. "She had taught us a tremendous amount about life and what to look for and how to live your life."



Peter, Jason, Nancy Evans and Heather

Today husband Peter is the CFO of MediZine Inc., which is the leader in consumer health educational marketing and publishes magazines including *Healthy Living*.

Son Jason played the French horn in high school. Deciding he preferred flying feet to flying fingers he put down the horn to put on track shoes.

Yesterday, July 1, Jason Saretsky began his new duties as Director of Men's and Women's Track and Field and Cross Country at Harvard.

Saretsky was a standout student-athlete in his own right as an undergraduate at Columbia. He was an Ivy League Heptagonal champion in the 3,200-meter relay, a member of Columbia's school-record relay squad in that event, and was a two-time All-Ivy League performer.

Proud brother to Heather, Saretsky is a 1999 graduate of Columbia with a bachelor's degree in psychology. He added a master's degree in applied physiology from Columbia's Teachers College in 2001 and is completing work toward a master's in business administration from Iona's Hagan School of Business.

Referring to her daughter's permanent residency Evans explained that, "The Center for Discovery's philosophy is - everything is a surprise. They are no expectations. Everyone is going to reach their capacity and be as independent as they can possible be. They make sure that they *make a way* to do it."

"One of the things that the Center and us as parents are trying to do, is raise awareness of music therapy and how important it is for every child - to get music therapy into the school system."

"Some of the wonderful things I have found in doing these concerts is that a lot of these kids are in wheelchairs and a lot of them have severe Cerebral Palsy. The minute the music starts they are singing with us, lifting their heads up and smiling. They are fabulous! They have started a jazz group with blind children who can play the piano and drums. It the most amazing thing you have ever seen. This jazz group is going out and performing in the community.



Heather in a musical therapy session. Photo courtesy Nancy Evans

"One of the things we want to do in raising money for them is to be able to build a music studio."

"The child basically helps to steer the music therapy session," explained Evans. "There is a "Hello Song" and a "Good-bye Song," so that there is a structure. The child knows when they first come in that there is going to be a routine. We start with the "Hello Song" and we end with the "Goodbye Song," but in between we can do anything. We can play any instrument, do any key."

"In Heather's session we started this Hello Song and the therapist helps. It was "Hello. Stacy," who is the therapist. Then Heather would either have to point to herself or say her name. When I joined the session I sang "Hello. Mommy." The day that I was there, Heather said her name, which I couldn't get over because I had *never* heard her say her name," emotionally recalled Nancy. "Then at the next session, when I *wasn't* there, they went to sing the Hello Song and Stacy said "Hello. Stacy."

"And, Heather said, "Hello - Mommy."

"Of course, the music therapist immediately called me to say that my daughter had said hello to me in absentia."

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