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Music educator and chorale director Jim Elsberry, 77, was ‘an outstanding teacher’

By Michael Kelly / World-Herald staff writer Aug 11, 2017



Jim Elsberry, the former director of the MasterSingers chorale in Omaha and retired director of choral music and jazz studies at the former Midland Lutheran College, died Monday at 77.

Jim Elsberry conducted 70 voices in glorious harmony, elevated the musical skills of college students and enjoyed coming up with witty puns.

Elsberry, the former director of the MasterSingers chorale in Omaha and retired director of choral music and jazz studies at the former Midland Lutheran College, died Monday at 77.

“He was one of the most important and gifted conductors I’ve ever seen work,” said Eric Richards, a former colleague in Fremont at what’s now called Midland University. “And he was an outstanding teacher.”

A member of the Nebraska Music Educators Association Hall of Fame, Elsberry is survived by sons Austin and Jordan. A memorial service will be held at 2 p.m. Wednesday at the Dugan Funeral Chapel in Fremont.

James A. Elsberry was born in Wausa, Nebraska. His sister, Dorene Sherman of Bellevue, said he played “Pistol Packin’ Mama” on ukulele at age 4.

He earned music degrees at Wayne State College and the University of Northern Colorado, and he taught at Omaha Benson High until joining Midland in 1976.

He developed what became known as the “Elsberry Sound,” influenced by jazz musicians such as Duke Ellington and Stan Kenton.

Besides serving for 30 years as artistic director of the MasterSingers, previously called “Die Meistersingers,” Elsberry directed shows at the old Firehouse Dinner Theater and was chorus master for Opera Omaha.

He enjoyed Native American culture as well as cooking, fishing, farming and restoring antiques. He also practiced what he called “punology,” plays on words that he called “illsberrys.”

Richards, now the director of bands and jazz studies at Sheridan College in Wyoming, said that in the most stressful times, Jim would calmly say, “Let’s get this handled.”

He had suffered from heart problems and lung cancer, and in recent times musical friends came to play for him a final time.

Anita Clark Jaynes played her harp in June. In July, Jeff Jenkins, a Nebraska City native and now a jazz pianist in Denver, gave a “Concert for Jim” with his vocalist wife.

Sherman, Elsberry’s sister, helped take care of her brother at the beginning and at the end of his life. He will be her reminder, she said, that “music is indeed what feelings sound like.”

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Notable Omaha-area deaths in 2017

Michael Kelly

Michael Kelly has covered police, courts and City Hall, and spent a decade as sports editor and sports columnist. He has written a metro column since 1991. With his wife, Barb, he has four children and eight grandchildren.