

business, but they were always an inspiration to follow my heart. When I auditioned for a music conservatory, my parents drove me, along with my accompanist, across four states to audition.

“I will never forget the day I received the letter that the conservatory would accept me as a choral education major, but my voice was too small to carry over an orchestra,” she continues. “I cried for an entire day. My parents encouraged me not to give up, and I attended the University of Iowa, where I received my BM degree.”

At college and beyond, Raymond’s voice teachers became instrumental. “My teacher, Janice Hanson, was a great inspiration [at college]. She had a gorgeous mezzo voice and was a real artist. Unfortunately, she died of cancer shortly after I gave my senior recital. At that point, I was married to a tenor who was also studying with Janice, and we contacted Janice’s friend Jean Kraft in New York to ask if she would give us voice lessons.

“Jean was the first person who said to me, ‘If you can imagine yourself doing anything else besides singing, do that. But if you have that fire in your belly that says you have to do this, then you know you have made the right choice,’” Raymond continues. “Jean and I have remained close friends ever since, and every one of her performances at the Met was an inspiration. After she felt that she had taught us all she could, she referred us to Bill and Dixie Neill, who were my teachers for many years. They were inspiring on many levels. I learned not only technique and making music of real quality, but also about the business of singing.”

Raymond looks back on that initial move to New York City with some awe. “Sometimes in life, you don’t stop to think practically about being able to support yourself or find a place to live,” she says. “We moved to New York, and it worked out surprisingly well for six years. We lived about a block from Lincoln Center, and my husband became the super of the building we lived in, which meant free rent and utilities!”

With that same added perspective that only hindsight gives, Raymond offers her advice for aspiring artists. “As singers, it is difficult to not take criticism personally, since we are our voices,” she says. “I can’t stress enough how important it is to have a

support system—a network of people who will be honest and who can understand on many levels what we need.”

Raymond continues to expand her own support network to find additional inspiration. “I have now resumed voice lessons with Deborah Birnbaum, who has a unique understanding of the body and breathing and a magical sense of how a piece should sound,” she says. “My lessons with her, my sessions with an excellent physical therapist, and Tai Chi lessons with a gifted master seem to be the perfect balance of what I need.”

Finally, Raymond’s own work as a teacher striving to inspire others, in turn, inspires her. “As a teacher, I love all of my students and find teaching to be so rewarding,” she says. “I try to inspire my students to pursue their passions as others have done with me. If we truly commit and persevere, we can’t fail!”

*If you would like to contribute to a future installment of “Who Inspires You?” please contact Michelle at [michellelatour@me.com](mailto:michellelatour@me.com).*

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