



VILLAGER BACKSTORY

You may know Mary Lou Merkner from her work in theater and music clubs, but what you may not know is she taught students who went on to careers like singing on Broadway, and she co-founded a community theater group.



Bill Mitchell | Daily Sun

GETTING TO KNOW MARY LOU MERKNER

Age: 90
Village: Mallory Square
Spouse: Jim
Family: Three daughters, seven grandchildren, three great-grandchildren
Moved Here In: 2013
Moved Here From: Gainesville
Favorite Villages Activities: Vespians, The Villages Musical Theater, bocce



Kristen Fiore

THE VILLAGES DAILY SUN

Do you know someone with an interesting backstory to tell? Email kristen.fiore@thevillagesmedia.com or call 352-753-1119, ext. 5270

Mary Lou Merkner grew up in Muncie, Indiana, where she could often be found standing between her grandparents' and their neighbor's garages, singing and vocalizing. Merkner, of the Village of Mallory Square, said she has felt the call of music since she was a child, and it has been part of her entire life. After high school, she studied at Ball State University, which was a teacher's college at the time, and then went on to teach in nearby Alexandria for three years. She taught all grade levels and would go around to different schools and classes, pushing around a cart with one of her favorite mottos taped to it: "Nothing great was ever accomplished without enthusiasm." Later, she attended

Northwestern University and earned a master's degree in vocal performance and vocal music education, then moved to Crown Point, where she'd spend the bulk of her career. At her new school in Crown Point, she was trying to build up enthusiasm for her department by putting on a musical and needed someone to help her make lights for the show. The other teachers recommended she talk to the new shop teacher. "I walked into the teacher's lounge, and he was there," Merkner said. "I said, 'You're just the man I wanted to meet.'" That ended up being a truer statement than she could've known at the time. Merkner said they now have been married for 62 years. The most exciting thing

about teaching, Merkner said is being able to relate to people, get the best out of them and get them excited about what they want to do. Several of her students went on to have their own successful careers in music. She taught Mark Jacoby, who starred in Broadway's "Phantom of the Opera." Other students went to work at university music departments, orchestras, dance troupes and more. After her second daughter was born, she took a break from teaching but was brought back after receiving an offer to teach music appreciation at Purdue University. Merkner said she taught there for 20 years. Outside of teaching, Merkner was involved in several singing and performing

groups, including the Chicago Symphony Chorus. She co-founded Crown Point's Playmakers Community Theater group and directed several community musicals like "1776." Eventually, she and her husband retired and moved to Gainesville, where she got involved in various music groups and developed lecture classes at the Oak Hammock Senior Center. Later, looking to downsize and live in a more active community, the couple moved to The Villages. Almost immediately, Merkner got involved in several music and theater groups, including The Villages Pops Chorus, the Vespians and The Villages Musical Theater. She has served as assistant director for several shows.

She also gives the occasional voice evaluation to resident vocalists in between other events on her schedule. "It's an honor to be able to do that," Merkner said. In the meantime, Merkner and her husband keep up an adventurer streak. They have biked and stayed in hostels in New Zealand, where Merkner broke her ankle while whitewater rafting and spent the rest of the trip seeing Australia on crutches and sleeping in a tent. A few years ago, she sang at her granddaughter's wedding, which was held on the beach in Cape Town, South Africa. And now, she lives life by another motto: "You don't stop singing or playing music because you grow old ... You grow old because you stop singing or playing music."

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