

THE OPERA VOLUNTEER VOICE

Advocate. Educate. Celebrate... the Power of Volunteers



Volume 50 Issue 3

The Official Newsletter of Opera Volunteers International

October 2026



is the emotional connection and sense of acceptance that individuals experience within a group, community, or organization.

It encompasses feeling valued, respected, and understood for one's unique identity, background, and contributions. When individuals feel a strong sense of belonging, they are more likely to engage actively, collaborate effectively, and contribute positively to their environment.



p.6



October 25, 2026

How to celebrate and connect with the International Opera Community



p.4

***Operatober* Is Back... and You're Invited!**

Following the fun of our inaugural celebration last year, OVI's Second Annual *Operatober* will bring members, volunteer groups, and opera companies together throughout October. Come celebrate the music we love, the volunteers who make opera happen, and the friendships that grow around both.



p.5

In This Issue

From the President	2
Join OVI Community	3
Membership Renewal...	3
World Opera Day	4
Operatober	5
Belonging	6
In their Words	7
Webinar Wisdom	8-10
Five Takeaways	10
Looking Forward	
Next Webinar	11
Apply now for Grants & Awards	11
2027 OA Conference	11
OVI at the OPERA America Conference	12-13
Member Spotlight	
Judy McDill	14-15

Newsletter Team

Rick Greenman - Editor
Danielle Di Stefano
Rhonda Catanzaro
Tyler McKenzie
David Schott - Design

From the President: Rhonda Catanzaro

A New Season. New Ideas. New Connections.



As opera companies begin a new season, Opera Volunteers International is beginning one, as well, and I couldn't be more excited about where we're headed.

Across North America, volunteers are welcoming first-time patrons, supporting fundraising efforts, introducing young people to opera, serving on boards, assisting with special events, and helping create the sense of community that makes every opera company stronger. Your work matters, and **OVI exists for one reason: to support you.**

This year, our focus is simple:

We want every OVI member to feel seen, heard, and valued.

That means creating more opportunities to learn from one another, to share ideas that work, and to build relationships across companies, regardless of size or budget. You'll see that commitment reflected throughout the coming year. Our Webinar Series will continue with practical conversations led by industry experts and volunteers who are finding creative ways to build audiences, strengthen community connections, and grow volunteer engagement. *Operatober* returns this Fall with even more opportunities to celebrate opera together, culminating in an *Operatober Finale* that will bring volunteers from across North America together for an evening of inspiration and fun.

Our Grants and Awards programs will continue to recognize innovation and excellence, while this newsletter and our growing online resources will highlight ideas you can take home and adapt for your own organization. If someone has found a better way to recruit volunteers, welcome new patrons, communicate with members, or build stronger partnerships with their opera company, we want to share it.

In short, OVI is becoming a place where great ideas travel.

But OVI is only as strong as the people who participate. I hope you'll join a webinar, submit an article, tell us about a successful project, encourage a colleague to become a member, or simply reach out and introduce yourself. Every connection strengthens our community.

As we begin this new membership year, thank you for everything you do for opera. Thank you for the time you share, the audiences you welcome, and the communities you help build.

I look forward to learning from you, and building this next chapter together.

With gratitude,



Rhonda Catanzaro

Join the OVI Community

Opera volunteers do extraordinary work every day, welcoming patrons, raising funds, advocating for the arts, supporting artists, and building connections within their communities.

OVI brings those volunteers together.

Through webinars, grants, awards, newsletters, and peer connections, OVI helps volunteers learn from one another, share successful ideas, and strengthen their organizations.

Why Join OVI?

- ▶ **Learn from volunteer leaders across North America.**
- ▶ **Access grants, awards, webinars, and practical resources.**
- ▶ **Connect with a community that celebrates and strengthens opera volunteers.**

For just \$60 annually as an individual member or \$125 as a group member, you help sustain a national network dedicated to Educating, Advocating, and Celebrating the Power of Volunteers.

We hope you'll join us.

[**Join**](#)

It's Time to Renew Your Membership

October 1 is the beginning of our new OVI membership year for individual as well as group memberships. We hope you will renew promptly so that your ongoing support can be recognized in our 2026-2027 Directory.

OVI is a 100% volunteer led 501(c) (3) and we rely on your dues to support our grants and member recognition initiatives.

Donating or renewing at the patron level directly underwrites the OVI Matching Grants that go to our group members.

[**Donate**](#)[**Renew Now**](#)

World Opera Day is an annual international awareness campaign that celebrates the positive impact, emotional power, and cultural value of opera in society.

Oct.



25

The core theme for 2026 centers around "**Opera Connects**," highlighting opera's capacity to transcend geopolitical borders, act as a tool for cultural diplomacy, and build bridges across languages and cultures.

The celebration is led and organized through a joint international collaboration between **OPERA America**, **Opera Europa**, and Opera Latinoamérica.

How to Get Involved

For Opera Guilds & Companies

Engage with Policymakers: A primary push for the 2026 campaign is Advocacy. Guilds and companies are encouraged to use official, ready-to-use communication kits and template letters to connect with local, regional, and national politicians to demonstrate opera's economic and social value.

Showcase Collaborations: Using the *#OperaConnects* graphic image, guilds should share behind-the-scenes stories of cross-cultural career developments, international co-productions, or unique global partnerships.

Host Community Events: Open your theater doors to the public. Guilds can organize open rehearsals, backstage tours, outdoor pop-up performances, workshops, or livestreamed mini-concerts to make the medium accessible to newcomers.

For Individuals & Opera Lovers

Participate in the Digital Campaign: Use the official hashtags **#WorldOperaDay** and **#OperaConnects** on social media to share your favorite operatic moments, tell a story of how a specific performance moved you, or highlight international artists you admire.

Stream Live Performances: Tune into global streaming events and world-premiere showcases hosted by local companies or international hubs like the official **World Opera Day** Platform.

Introduce Someone New: Bring a friend to a local event, share an opera playlist, or attend a community screening to break the stereotype that opera is an exclusive or outdated art form.

Operatober 2026

Join our *Operatober Finale* Thursday, October 29!

We'll have a special guest, entertainment, and prizes for your winning *Operatober* entries in categories ranging from costumes and creative dress to food pairings, photos, and more. [Click here](#) to participate or email to ovquestions@gmail.com

.....And this year, there may be a few witches involved.

The centerpiece of *Operatober 2026* will be the Metropolitan Opera's *Live in HD* presentation of Verdi's *Macbeth* on October 17, perfect inspiration for a month of music, creativity, community, and just a little mischief.

Five Ways to Join the Fun



1. Make Verdi's *Macbeth* an occasion.



Gather your volunteer group or a few opera-loving friends and invite them to attend the Met HD presentation together. No HD theater nearby? The Met now offers "Live at Home Streaming," to be enjoyed on TV. Tickets are \$10-\$20 depending on location. [Click here](#) for more information.

Costumes welcome but not required! Take a group photo, make an evening of it, and let OVI know how you celebrated.

2. Show us opera volunteers in action.



Operatober is also a chance to celebrate the people who make opera possible. Send us photos of volunteers ushering, greeting audiences, hosting artists, singing in choruses, raising funds, working behind the scenes, or simply enjoying opera together. We want to see (and share) the many faces of opera volunteerism.

3. Help build the OVI *Operatober* Playlist.



What opera selection do you never tire of hearing? Submit your favorites for our first OVI *Operatober* Playlist. Opera companies can also share selections from their 2026 - 27 seasons. By the end of the month, we hope to have a playlist as varied as the OVI community itself.

4. Bring opera to the table.



Calling all foodies and mixologists! Create a *Macbeth* or World Opera Day inspired appetizer, dessert, cocktail, mocktail, or other culinary creation. Share the recipe and a photo with us. Eye of newt is entirely optional.

5. Register here to attend our Zoom *OVI Operatober Finale*

Register

Thurs. 10/29, 2026 7:30 PM EDT | 6:30 CDT | 5:30 MDT | 4:30 PDT

The Gift of Belonging

by Rhonda Catanzaro

This summer, I flew to St. Louis for what amounted to a single day with **Opera Theatre of Saint Louis** (OTSL). I came to see ***A Streetcar Named Desire***, but when I returned home, I found myself thinking just as much about everything that happened around the opera.

My day began with OTSL volunteers, including lunch at the Saint Louis Art Museum. By the time I arrived at the theatre that evening, I wasn't walking into an unfamiliar place alone. I was arriving among people I had come to know.

That sense of welcome continued throughout the evening. I joined new friends for a gourmet picnic under the big tent, surrounded by the theatre's beautiful gardens. We talked and laughed before the performance, enjoyed the opera together, and afterward gathered again for drinks and conversation. It was a wonderful evening of opera, but it was also something more. It was an evening of community ...*And that distinction stayed with me.*

Those who welcomed me did not need to buy my ticket or pay for my dinner. What they gave me was something both simpler and more valuable: people with whom to enjoy the experience.

For those of us who care about the future of opera, I think there is an important lesson here.

We spend a great deal of time asking how we can attract new audiences. We talk about programming, pricing, marketing, accessibility and outreach, all important considerations. Perhaps we should also ask a more human question: When someone comes through our doors, who will make them feel that they belong there?



Volunteers are uniquely positioned to provide that welcome. We know the traditions, the people, the rhythms of an opera evening, and we know the joy of sharing them. A volunteer can turn an unfamiliar venue into a welcoming place, introduce a newcomer to others, invite someone to a picnic or a conversation, and make certain that a first-time guest doesn't remain a stranger.

My day in St. Louis reminded me that hospitality doesn't have to be elaborate or expensive. Sometimes it is simply saying, "Come sit with us."

I traveled to St. Louis to experience *A Streetcar Named Desire*. I came home having experienced something else as well: a wonderful example of how volunteers can transform attendance into belonging.

Four words, **"Come sit with us,"** can make all the difference!

In Their Own Words

Belonging is something we can talk about, but perhaps it is best understood through the people who experience it. We asked three longtime OVI members a simple question: Why do you belong to OVI? Here's what they told us.

Carolyne Koelkner, Executive Director, Opera Maine



"Opera Volunteers International has truly played a meaningful role in **Opera Maine's** journey. OVI's passion for opera, its commitment to sustaining the art form, the generosity of its members, and the resources it provides - educational webinars, gatherings, grants, and models for energizing and involving volunteers - have all been instrumental to Opera Maine's growth and success and have kept us connected to OVI for many years. We are particularly grateful for OVI's support of our volunteer programs that help our audiences, especially first-time opera attendees, feel warmly welcomed into our Opera Maine family. We are proud to be part of OVI, a community that continues to work together to sustain this vibrant art form."

Don Dagenais, Past OVI Board Member/ President, Kansas City, MO



"As a person who has been an opera volunteer for over 40 years, I have found that the most motivated and effective volunteers are those who truly love this greatest of all art forms. They pursue their volunteerism for the joy of making opera accessible and available to all. That is why participating in Opera Volunteers International (OVI) has been important to me. Opera volunteers get inspiration from the art form and from each other. Communicating with other opera volunteers, they develop ideas, obtain practical 'how-to' advice, and learn how to make a greater impact. That kind of exchange can only come through OVI, which puts volunteers in contact with each other. It is something the opera companies cannot do. I hope that opera volunteers across the continent will continue to help and inspire each other for generations to come."

Vivian Davis, Opera Omaha Guild, OVI Northwest Region



"Why does OVI attract and retain my continued membership? Because opera is an international art, it can benefit from the aid of an international organization. OVI members share that commitment and enjoy working together with like-minded volunteers. We recognize that we have to respond to continuing challenges to support opera societies. We enjoy the team-work that characterizes OVI. Being part of such an organization has many rewards, one of which is receiving recognition from our peers. Bravi to all!"

Ideas from the OVI Summer Webinar:

Connecting Communities, Growing Audiences

The strongest audience-building strategy may begin with a simple question:

Do people feel they belong?

How do opera companies reach new audiences, and, perhaps more importantly, how do they build relationships that encourage people to come back?

That question was at the heart of Opera Volunteers International's recent webinar, *Connecting Communities, Growing Audiences*, which featured Renata Herrera and Morgan Sass from Florentine Opera, as well as Dani Keil with Tulsa Opera.

The conversation offered many practical ideas, but an important theme emerged beneath them all: **Growing an audience is not simply about selling more tickets. It is about building relationships.** And relationships begin long before someone walks through the doors for a performance.

Start with the Community, Not the Ticket

One of the clearest messages of the webinar was that meaningful engagement begins by listening to the community rather than deciding in advance what the community ought to want from an opera company.

Successful outreach is not simply taking opera to a community. It means developing genuine relationships with schools, neighborhoods, organizations, families, artists, and community partners, and allowing those relationships to shape the way the company engages.

That distinction matters. A one-time event may introduce someone to opera. A continuing relationship can make that person feel that opera is part of their community.

And that is a very different goal.

Make the First Experience Feel Welcoming

For those of us who already love opera, it can be easy to forget how intimidating a first encounter with the art form can feel.

There are so many questions like: "What should I wear?" "Will I understand it?" "When do I applaud?" "Is this really for someone like me?"

The webinar discussion suggested that companies can remove many of those invisible barriers by thinking intentionally about the entire experience, not simply the performance on the stage.

Connecting Communities, Growing Audiences cont'd

Marketing, communication, community events, pre-performance experiences, personal welcomes, and opportunities to connect with others all help answer an unspoken question a newcomer may be asking:

"Is there a place for me here?"

When the answer is "yes," a first-time visitor has a much better chance of becoming a second-time visitor.

Engagement Is a Relationship, Not an Event

Another important takeaway was the value of continuity.

Community engagement cannot be something an organization turns on when it needs to fill seats. Trust develops over time. People recognize when an organization is genuinely interested in being part of the community... and when it appears only when it has something to sell.

That changes the measure of success. Ticket sales certainly matter, but so do relationships formed, partnerships strengthened and people reached. The invitations extended allow individuals to see the opera company as an organization that belongs to their community.

In other words, engagement may not always produce an immediate transaction. It builds the relationship from which future participation can grow.

Belonging May Be the Bridge

Perhaps the most compelling thread running through the conversation was one that extends well beyond audience development: people return to places where they feel welcome, recognized, and connected. That has implications for every part of the opera world.

- ▶ If we want new audiences, we must make it easier for newcomers to imagine themselves as part of the opera community.
- ▶ If we want younger audiences, we need to understand their interests and experiences rather than simply asking them to adopt ours.
- ▶ If we want more diverse audiences, engagement must involve authentic relationships with communities rather than occasional invitations.
- ▶ And if we want people to return, the experience needs to provide more than an excellent performance. It needs to create connection.

Connecting Communities, Growing Audiences cont'd

And What About Volunteers?

For OVI members, perhaps the most exciting question is: Where do volunteers fit into all of this?

The answer: almost everywhere.

Volunteers are often among the first people an audience member sees. They are ushers, greeters, ambassadors, educators, event hosts, donors, advocates, and longtime members of their communities. They know people. They make introductions. They tell stories. And, perhaps, most importantly, they can provide the human welcome that no marketing campaign can duplicate.

This gives volunteers an extraordinary opportunity. Instead of thinking only about how volunteers can help an opera company operate, perhaps we should also be asking how volunteers can help an opera company belong to its community.

This could take a myriad of forms. It might mean inviting someone who has never attended an opera to come along. Perhaps it's helping with a neighborhood event, welcoming a first-time attendee or connecting the company with another community organization. Or, it can be simply noticing the person standing alone in the lobby and saying, "we're glad you're here."

Growing audiences is complicated work. There is no single program, marketing campaign, or ticket offer that will solve the challenge.

But the webinar offered an encouraging place to begin: Build relationships. Open doors. Create connections. Help people belong.

That is good advice for growing an opera audience. It may also be very good advice for growing a Guild, or a stronger volunteer base.

Five Takeaways

1. ENGAGEMENT BEGINS WITH LISTENING

Start with the community, not with the ticket you want to sell.

2. THE FIRST VISIT HAS TO FEEL WELCOMING

People are more likely to return when they can picture themselves belonging.

3. RELATIONSHIPS COME BEFORE TRANSACTIONS

Community engagement is long-term work, not a one-performance marketing strategy.

4. BELONGING TURNS FIRST-TIMERS INTO RETURNERS

A great performance matters. So does the experience surrounding it.

5. VOLUNTEERS CAN BE THE BRIDGE

A personal welcome, invitation, or introduction can make opera feel like part of someone's community.

Looking Forward

Stay tuned for our next webinar:

The New Volunteer - Recruiting, Engaging, and Keeping Volunteers

Has volunteering changed faster than our volunteer organizations have?

In this Webinar, we will explore what motivates people to volunteer today. From micro-volunteering and project-based opportunities, to attracting younger volunteers, to onboarding strategies and choosing skillsets to fill vacancies... industry experts and leaders will share their go-to's on turning one-time volunteers into long-term advocates and ambassadors.

Do you have a "burning issue" you want OVI to explore? We'd love to hear from you! Email your idea to ovquestions@gmail.com

Celebrate Excellence. Support Volunteerism.

Each year, OVI recognizes the extraordinary contributions of opera volunteers through our

[Projects of Special Merit Awards](#)

[Partners in Excellence Awards](#)

[Matching Grants](#)

that help volunteer-led organizations bring creative projects to life.

Applications for OVI's 2027 Awards and Grants are **due February 15, 2027**. We encourage members to consider the outstanding people and projects in your organization that deserve recognition, and your group's initiatives that could benefit from OVI grant support.

Your generosity makes a difference, too. Donations to OVI help us strengthen our grant program and support the work OVI members are doing in their communities.

[Award and Grant Applications](#)

[Donate](#)



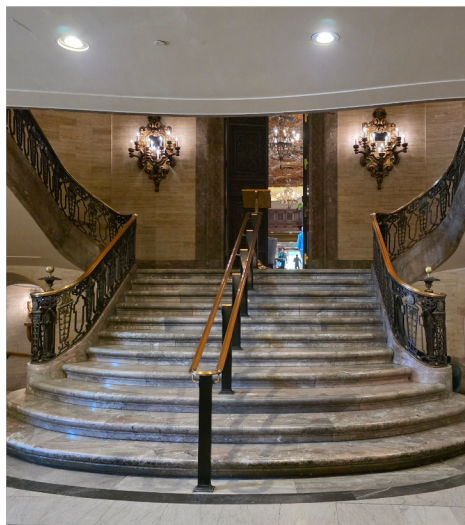
Opera Conference 2027 Join us May 12-14 in Milwaukee, WI

Opera Conference 2027 features three days of innovative programming, hands-on learning, and networking opportunities, all at the iconic Pfister Hotel in downtown Milwaukee. Plus, you can sit back and enjoy a performance of *The Magic Flute* from The Florentine Opera. Registration will open in late Fall.



OVI at Opera Conference 2026 in Wilmington, Delaware

Last May, the OPERA America conference brought OVI members together in Wilmington, Delaware, for a few wonderful days of reconnecting with friends across the opera landscape, sharing ideas, enjoying opera together, and experiencing the historic elegance of the Hotel du Pont. A highlight was our annual OVI Awards Luncheon, where we celebrated outstanding volunteers and volunteer-led projects from communities nationwide. Wilmington reminded us of something at the heart of OVI: opera brings us together, but friendships and shared commitment keep us connected.





"Kindness distributes the joy of problem-solving to everyone. It creates a safe environment that unleashes innovation, especially the unselfish kind, and it turns perceived liabilities into assets."

— **mames Rhee**

TED Business

Reproduction or dissemination of materials is strictly prohibited.



OVI Member Spotlight:

Judy McDill and Houston Grand Opera Guild

Written by Danielle Di Stefano, soprano; OVI VP of Communications and Marketing, Director of Website Administration and Brand Curation



It was a day of volunteering at the rodeo (yes, an actual rodeo!) nearly twenty years ago that led to volunteering at and managing the Boutique of one of the country's premier opera houses. This is the story of Judy McDill, current Vice President of the Houston Grand Opera (HGO) Guild's Boutique. In addition to being an active member of her community, she's a devoted grandmother and, most importantly, is responsible for all operations in the Boutique.

Over the prior year she's increased sales by a whopping 40%, taking a struggling shop whose footprint had shrunk almost 75% to becoming a vibrant mainstay of the Guild's income. Her secret? Unique merchandise to attract patrons, sourced from a variety of vendors and independent artists. She uses Faire, a wholesale online marketplace that connects vendors with artists and companies, for sourcing many of her pieces. Many of them are exclusive to the Houston Grand Opera Boutique, including a new line of scarf designs by Allan Virgo.

"I looked for things that fit a wide range of prices, not just the expensive things for people that have more disposable income," Judy said. "[Especially] the lower priced items for when the young kids come in or the high schoolers. They can find a memento to have from their trip to the opera."



But merchandise neither sells itself nor keeps the Boutique running. The true treasures aren't always in the display cases, but in the volunteers themselves behind the tables. Judy credits a big part of her team's success to developing an onboarding process that defined clear volunteer roles and outlined staff protocols, fostering flexibility and quick-thinking among team members.

"I devised 'Welcome to the Boutique' handouts that explained each person's duties: who managers are, what they [the managers and team members] should be doing. Our volunteer team changes from season to season, sometimes night to night. The written instructions, constant communication, and getting our processes down to a science are so important." And they certainly have: Judy and her team can set up the Boutique and all its merchandise in twenty minutes or less, if need be!



When Judy stepped into her position, she faced a team who'd been disenchanted by previous management, burnt out or even walking out from frustration. Her first order of business was ensuring each member felt supported and valued, their needs heard and met so they were willing to work together and try again. Active listening, creative problem solving and collaboration with team members helped her bridge the gaps. That ability to go with the flow, solving problems with professionalism while maintaining a friendly and approachable attitude, is key to a good Boutique leader.



Good observation skills and learning from everywhere, especially retail displays, is another hallmark. "Even just going to the grocery store and studying the displays can be helpful," Judy said. "Notice things like product placement, stock rotation, pricing changes in relation to the time of year. Department store displays are really good for this kind of thing; I've gotten a few tricks from them."



But the most important application of those observation skills is with her own team. She takes the time to get to know her volunteers as people, not just employees, and it has helped her forge a family of friends that go beyond the opera house.

The bonds and friendships created in service to our beloved artform can be some of the most meaningful and enduring connections we can make. They all share a common thread: a sense of belonging and stewardship as we work together to enrich our communities and make a lasting difference. And for volunteers, that is truly music to our ears!



Excerpted from a full interview. For the entire article, visit our new [Member Spotlight page](#). If you have questions for Judy or HGO, write to: ovquestions@gmail.com



Is Your Group Thinking of Starting an Opera Boutique

For more information on how to start a boutique or tips on how to generate more profit from your existing shop, see our pdf manual: **An Opera Boutique** by Pattie Comstock of Houston Grand Opera.

This booklet as well as many other valuable resources on volunteer management, communication, and other topics can be found on our [OVI Knowledge Base](#), a members-only section. From forming a board, to best email practices, to cultivating a volunteer base and more, we've got you covered!