

THE OPERA VOLUNTEER VOICE

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



Volume 50 Issue 2

The Official Newsletter of Opera Volunteers International

April 2026

A Fresh New Look for OVI!

We are thrilled to introduce OVI's new branding! From our logo and fonts to our refined new color palette, you'll see these changes reflected on our website, social media, and right here in this newsletter—which is now moving to a digital-only format.



While we wanted a look that felt modern and professional, this redesign was about more than just aesthetics. It was a journey back to our core values: **Advocating, Educating, and Celebrating our incredible volunteers**. Special thanks to the Opera Guild of Rochester, the **OVI Rebranding Committee** (Danielle Di Stefano, Rick Greenman, Tyler McKenzie, Rhonda Catanzaro, Deanna Stevenson and Mary Sveta) and designer David Schott for helping us capture the heart of who we are. It was an exhilarating process, and we can't wait to tell you more about it soon.

This is your community, and we want to hear from you!

- Send inquiries to: oviquestions@gmail.com
- Visit our website: operavolunteers.org
- Newsletter submissions:
newsletter@operavolunteers.org
with subject line: OVI Newsletter submission

What do you think of the new look? What stories should we cover next? Whether it's highlighting your members, funding your projects through grants, or representing you at OPERA America conferences, we are here to support you.

The Opera Volunteer Voice is yours.
Let's make it heard together!

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From the President: Rhonda Catanzaro

As our country approaches its 250th anniversary, I've been thinking about the role opera and its volunteers have played in shaping our communities.

From the earliest opera houses to today's vibrant companies, volunteers have always been at the center of it all. You raise funds, welcome audiences, support education programs, and help keep this art form alive and thriving.

At OVI, we see that impact every day.

For more than fifty years, we've connected, supported, and celebrated the people who make opera possible behind the scenes. And as we look ahead to **America 250**, it feels like a moment not just to reflect, but to push forward.

Through our grants, webinars, and shared ideas, we are helping one another strengthen our organizations and reach new audiences. Just as importantly, we are inviting the next generation of volunteers to join us.



That's how this work continues.

Thank you for everything you do, and for being part of this remarkable community.

Here's to the next act!

 *Rhonda Cat*

National Volunteer Week

April 19-25



This National Volunteer Week, we celebrated the volunteers who power opera forward every day. As a fully volunteer-driven organization, OVI stands with you, honoring your passion, your leadership, and the vital role you play in keeping opera vibrant.

We invite you to share your celebration photos and stories for a future issue as we spotlight the incredible work of our volunteer community. Email them to newsletter@operavolunteers.org or oviquestions@gmail.com with subject line: OVI Newsletter submission

Did You Know?

Opera houses were among America's earliest cultural centers.

In the 18th and 19th centuries, opera houses were often the largest public gathering spaces in a community, hosting concerts, lectures, civic meetings, and celebrations.

The Central City Opera House in Central City, Colorado was built by miners.

In 1878, Welsh and Cornish miners in the Colorado Rockies funded and constructed the elegant theater themselves, determined that their frontier town should have great music and theater.

San Francisco's War Memorial Opera House (built in 1932) helped shape world history.

In 1945, representatives from 50 nations gathered there to sign the charter establishing the United Nations.



Central City Opera House



San Francisco's War Memorial Opera House

Historic venues still serve modern audiences.

Many of America's 19th-century opera houses, including those featured here, continue to present opera today, a testament to the communities and volunteers who have sustained them.

4 Ways to Get Involved Right Now

Opera Volunteers International thrives because members step forward with ideas, energy, and a love of opera. If you would like to become more involved with OVI, here are four opportunities to jump in.



Let's Zoom Together

OVI is going on the road - virtually! This Spring, join us for four regional Zoom sessions led by VP of Membership & Outreach **Tyler McKenzie** (OTSL) and our Regional Directors, featuring conversations on mentorship, board governance, and audience development.

We'll also host a special social gathering celebrating opera, wine, and food pairings.

Truly, something for everyone.

Watch for dates and details coming soon. All are welcome!

1) Help Shape *Operatober*

Operatober is our month-long celebration of opera volunteers across North America. Join a small virtual planning group to help develop ideas, highlight member organizations, and promote the month-long celebration, leading up to *World Opera Day 2026*.

2) Join the Virtual Gala Team

As part of *Operatober*, OVI is organizing a special Virtual Gala. Volunteers are needed to assist with program ideas, storytelling, guest invitations, and promotion. Out-of-the-box thinkers are welcome!

3) Share Your Guild's Story

One of the best ways to strengthen our community is by sharing ideas. If your guild has launched a successful program, event, or volunteer initiative, we would love to feature it in an upcoming newsletter or webinar.

4) Make an International Impact

Help shape the future of opera volunteerism: lend your voice, your ideas, and your leadership to OVI's Board of Directors.

Even a small amount of time can make a meaningful difference, and it's a wonderful way to connect with fellow opera volunteers across North America.

Interested?

Please contact Rhonda at president@operavolunteers.org

OVI's 2026 Awardees

Supporting innovation. Honoring excellence.

— Matching Grants —



Chattanooga Symphony and Opera

Family Opera

Chattanooga Symphony and Opera (CSO) will partner with Atlanta Opera to present a family-friendly *Cinderella* in March 2027 at a Title I school, community center, and the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga. Two performances will be free, expanding access for underserved audiences.

As part of the CSO's Family Series, this program blends music and storytelling to boost early literacy. Children enjoy interactive highlights like an "instrument petting zoo"—where they can get hands-on with the instruments and even take home their own book. This event serves as the grand capstone of the series.



Knoxville Opera

Studio Arts Administration Volunteer Fellowship

This fellowship introduces emerging artists to the administrative and volunteer side of opera. In partnership with the University of Tennessee, participants receive training in fundraising, audience development, and nonprofit operations.

Fellows then serve alongside Camerata volunteers at events, gaining hands-on experience to complement their artistic training and prepare them as future advocates and leaders.



Niagara Arts and Cultural Center (NACC)

World Opera Day Opera on the Border

This cross-cultural World Opera Day event celebrates opera's ability to connect communities across borders. Free or low-cost admission are at the heart of the NACC's events, ensuring equitable access to operatic performances in an underserved community. With an international cast of artists, repertoire rarely heard in the Buffalo-Niagara region and educational artist talkbacks, the project invites both new and seasoned audiences to experience opera on a new level.

Volunteers play a key role in production and outreach, reinforcing opera as a vital, inclusive and community-building art form.



Opera Guild of Rochester

Viva Voce Style Guide & Volunteer Training

This project supports *Viva Voce*, the Guild's award-winning e-magazine, produced 11 times annually by volunteers. The publication not only highlights regional opera programming, but also provides educational content tied to performances.

Funding will enhance design standards, train volunteer editors, and create a formal style guide, ensuring consistency and sustainability while supporting future volunteers.

— Partners in Excellence —



Houston Grand Opera Guild

Judy McDill

As Boutique VP, **Judy McDill** applied her extensive retail experience with creativity and leadership to increase sales by 40% through strategic merchandising, new exclusive items, and targeted promotions. She expanded product offerings, introduced incentives, and created a volunteer training guide, strengthening the Guild's primary revenue source and enhancing the patron experience. Her impressive professionalism, strong problem-solving and negotiation skills when dealing with immediate challenges has made her an invaluable asset to the staff.

Opera Theatre of Saint Louis Guild

50th Anniversary



Founded in 1976, the Guild has grown into one of the nation's most active opera support organizations. With 24 active committees and approximately 14,000 volunteer hours annually, it provides support to every department of OTSL. Its longstanding contributions span fundraising, education, publications, and direct operational support. They have established a myriad of initiatives and services for the company, including the OTSL Boutique, a Docent Program for patrons and the community, and their newsletter, *Overture*.

Young Patronesses of the Opera (YPO)

70th Anniversary *Florida Grand Opera*



Since 1956, YPO has advanced opera education through its mission to foster understanding, appreciation, and love of opera through education. Its *In-School Opera Program* has reached over 500,000 children, serving 20,000 students annually. This program brings free fully-staged, professional children's opera performances to approximately 30 South Florida elementary schools each year. The organization also supports teacher programs, educational materials, and a nationally recognized vocal competition for emerging artists.

— Projects of Special Merit —

The Erwin H. Johnson Memorial Fund, Inc. for Opera

Kiki the Kitten & the Tiny Squeak



Kiki the Kitten & the Tiny Squeak is a unique and entertaining outreach program consisting of two parts: the children's coloring-story book and an optional, educational virtual Zoom based on the book.

Outreach program coordinators and teachers alike have praised the book, artwork, and its interactive introduction to opera that includes plants, stars and animals singing.

Email ehjfund@gmail.com for more information.



Knoxville Opera Camerata

Open Dress Rehearsals for Students

This initiative provides K-12 students with free access to final dress rehearsals, removing financial barriers to live performance. Overall experience ratings were extremely high, averaging 4.92 out of 5, and respondents reported a strong likelihood of returning, averaging 4.83 out of 5. Volunteers support logistics, allowing staff to focus on production while building future audiences.



Opera Theatre of Saint Louis Guild

Arts Advocacy Initiative

Volunteers engaged in coordinated advocacy efforts, meeting with state legislators and conducting outreach from home. The initiative not only strengthened relationships with policymakers, but established an ongoing model for arts advocacy, training participants in valuable skills.



Young Patronesses of the Opera (YPO)

Florida Grand Opera Voice Competition

Now in its 54th year, this biennial vocal competition supports emerging singers through performance opportunities, mentorship, and awards up to \$10,000. Led by more than 50 volunteers, the fully funded program continues to elevate young talent and the broader opera community.

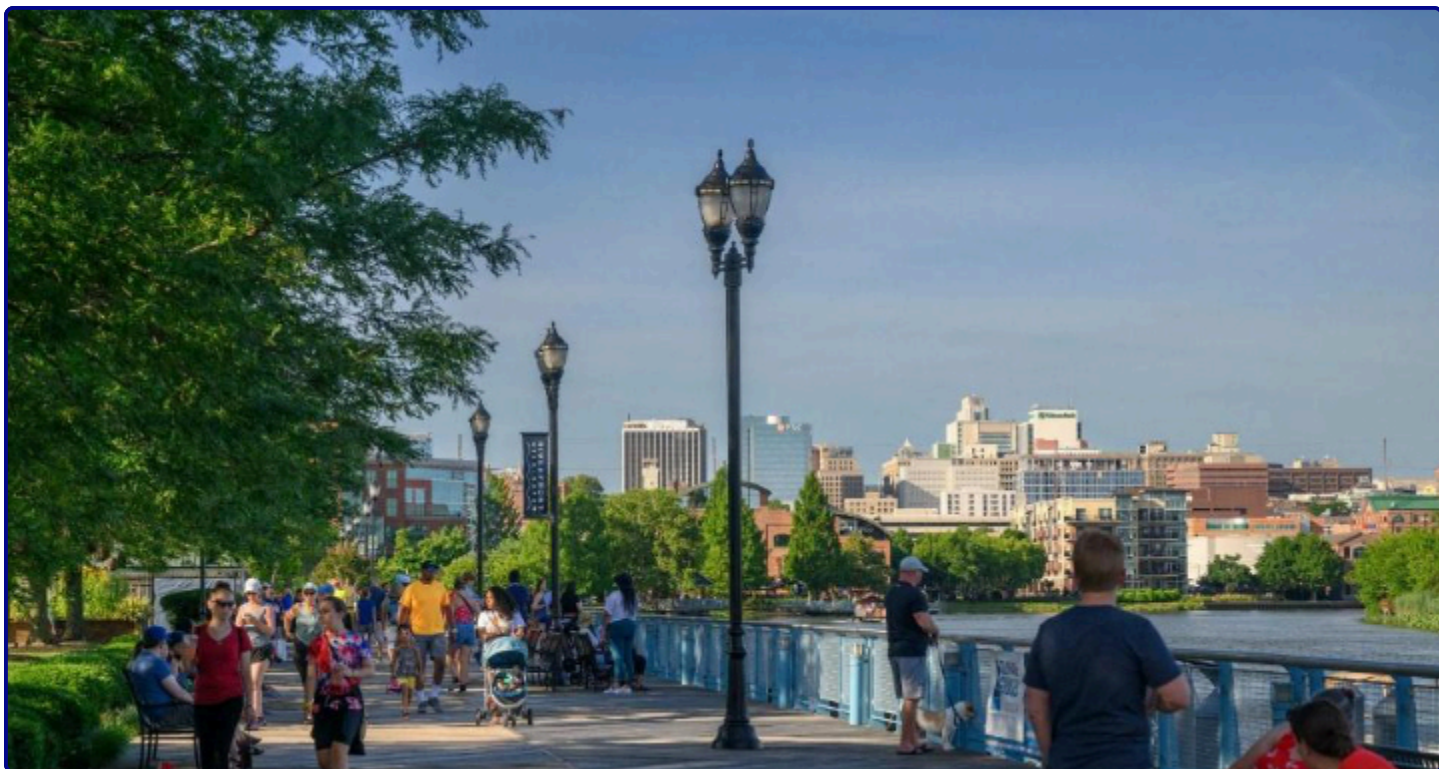


Photo by Moonloop Photography

OVI at the OPERA America Conference

May 12–15 in Wilmington, Delaware



When opera leaders from across the country gather next month for the annual OPERA America Conference in Wilmington, Delaware, they will be meeting in a city whose motto is “In the Middle of It All.” That phrase could easily describe opera volunteers, as well. Volunteers are often right at the center of the action, welcoming audiences, supporting artists, raising funds, advocating for the art form, and helping opera companies thrive in their communities.

In addition to our volunteer specific events, OVI attendees may attend the host reception, general sessions, and other open meetings as time and interest allow. And be sure to schedule some free time to take in the sights. There will be three opera performances that we can attend at a discounted price. The OVI Volunteer table will be our center of operations where we meet in between sessions and advocate for volunteers in opera.

Registration is still open and the OVI 2-Day Pass enables our members to save \$350 on conference registration. Visit the Opera Conference to learn more about the conference, the hotel, the performances, and things to see and do in Wilmington.

[Learn More About the Conference](#)

OVI Conference Events

OVI will host our Annual Board Meeting and a series of sessions designed especially for volunteers. OVI Conference Chair **Carol Steigelman** (Guild of the Glimmerglass Festival) has organized programming that reflects OVI's guiding spirit: **Educate. Advocate. Celebrate... the Power of Volunteers.**

— May 13, 9:00 a.m. - 10:00 a.m. —

Volunteers Powering Opera: Ideas, Impact, and What's Ahead

Discover how Opera Volunteers International is supporting opera companies through grants, new initiatives, and volunteer leadership that strengthen companies and communities.

Presenters: Tyler McKenzie (Opera Theatre of Saint Louis); Laura Tansey Wetzel (Guild of the Glimmerglass Festival); Carol Steigelman (OVI); Rhonda Catanzaro (OVI)

— May 13, 3:00 p.m. -4:00 p.m. —

Opera Advocates: Raising Funds and Raising Voices

Volunteer organizations play a vital role in advancing opera in their communities. This roundtable session explores how volunteers are combining creative fundraising, effective communication, and passionate advocacy to support the artists and professionals who bring opera to life.

— May 14 —

Celebrating Volunteer Excellence: OVI Awards Breakfast*

Opera Volunteers International will acknowledge the individuals and organizations whose dedication and leadership help sustain and grow opera in communities across North America. The annual event celebrates the volunteers who have been recognized this year through our awards and grants.

**Invitation only.*

At Opera Conference you will:

Network with leaders from inside and outside the opera field. Engage in thoughtful discussions in Working Groups, Roundtable Discussions, and General Sessions.

► Keep Them Coming Back

What opera producers can do to transform audience expectations and improve retention.

► Designing the Future

Can new tools, partnerships, and practices increase capacity and reduce costs in opera production?

► Advocate Like a Pro

How effective advocacy strategies can sustain and grow support for the art form.

Engage in thoughtful discussions, identify strategic priorities, and investigate solutions to challenges in Working Groups and Roundtable Discussions.

Enjoy a production of *Andrea Chénier*, from our host company, OperaDelaware. Plus additional performances from opera companies, including Opera Delaware, Opera Philadelphia and Wilmington Concert Opera



OA CEO Michael J. Bobbitt with immediate past CEO Marc Scorca

OPERA AMERICA

OPERA America Regional Meetings

New OA President and CEO, Michael Bobbitt, has been traveling across the country to “meet and greet” OA member groups. OVI leaders attended the Chicago meeting last month. It was great to share time with fellow opera leaders and hear more of Michael’s vision for OA. Here’s a current list of dates, locations, and the registration link.

- ▶ Washington D.C. – [April 17](#)
- ▶ San Francisco - [June 11](#), 1-4pm – registration to open soon
- ▶ Los Angeles – [June 15](#)
- ▶ Des Moines – [July 16](#)

Or join [virtual livestream meetings](#):

- ▶ Central Region - [April 14](#)
- ▶ Eastern Region – [June 9](#)

OPERA America Report

By Rhonda Sweeney

What a wonderful time in NYC (March 18 - 22) to reunite with OVI friends and opera friends in general. The annual **OPERA America Trustee Forum** coincided this year with both the Met Opera's **National Trustee weekend** and the **Laffont Competition Grand Finals Concert**, which is what I typically come up to New York City for each year. As Director for the Houston District of the Laffont Competition, I like to see the last step in the competition for the next generation of young singers.

But first, OPERA America had organized a fun week of activities, from visiting the **Whitney Museum** in the Meat Packing District, to seeing *Ragtime*, a NYPhil world premiere, and Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde*, all at Lincoln Center! The centerpiece event was **OPERA America Salutes**, an awards dinner, bringing together artists, producers, and advocates in a special tribute to some of the field’s most accomplished figures. Opera Hall of Fame inductees and other opera luminaries, including Marc Scorca who

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OPERA America past CEO, Marc Scorca, with OVI past presidents *L. to R.*, Sharon Gioia, Rhonda Sweeney, and Jane Hartley.

had just retired after 35 years at the helm of the organization. General Directors from across North America were in attendance, as well as world class singers and opera philanthropists who keep our art form vibrant! It was a magical evening, and a great place to meet up with past OVI Presidents **Jane Hartley** and **Sharon Gioia**, and to welcome new OPERA America CEO **Michael J. Bobbitt** in person after hearing from him on our first OVI Webinar of 2026!

The National Laffont meeting and Competition events provided another chance to see OVI friends, including former OVI Board member **Wilma Wilcox** and current OVI Treasurer **Dianne Schemm**, both from Kansas City, who had come to support their Laffont District and Region singers! A grand time was had, and we heard wonderful singing, with 6 Winners selected, each winning \$20,000 and 4 Finalists winning \$10,000 each. Over \$500,000 was awarded this season, from volunteers across North America who love opera and want to support young singers. It's another way to support opera in your local community!



LYP on Tap: Highlights from this Season

What is it?

LYP on Tap is a monthly event series presented by the Lyric Opera Young Professionals, serving opera fans **ages 21–45**. These events take place outside of the opera house to provide a relaxed environment for building friendships and growing a relationship with the Lyric Opera of Chicago.

Why Attend?

The "First Event" Experience: A perfect, low-pressure way for new members to meet the group and ask questions before attending a full opera.

Beyond Intermission: While intermissions at the opera house go by quickly, "On Tap" creates the time and space to truly get to know one another.

Accessible & Welcoming: Events are intended to be free to attend with a cash bar option to ensure cost is never a barrier. Our favorite guest feedback? *"Wow, I didn't expect everyone to be so nice!"*

How It Works

Board-Driven: LYP Board Members pair up to plan one month of the season, resulting in programming that reflects their unique interests and talents.

Strategic Locations: Venues are selected that do not charge a room fee or minimum spend to keep events accessible.

Creative Outreach: We focus on joint events that invite non-opera groups to get excited about our productions.

No Hard Sell: It's never a sales pitch - always an invitation to return or meet back at the opera house.

Highlights From This Season

Sips & Sorcery: A happy hour featuring a tarot card reader to promote *Medea*.

Opera & Fashion: A look at costuming highlights from the current season.

La TRIVIAta: Our signature opera trivia night.

Taste of Next Season: An evening of curated craft beer and opera pairings featuring upcoming productions.



About Lyric Young Professionals (LYP)

Lyric Young Professionals (LYP) is a growing group of dynamic opera lovers dedicated to building the next generation of supporters for Lyric Opera of Chicago. They engage their members through performances, education, professional networking opportunities, and unique social events to raise funds for the **Ryan Opera Center**, Lyric's young artist training program.

Follow them: Facebook: Lyric Young Professionals |
Instagram: @lyricoperayp



Communication is Key

Does your message match your mission?

Communication is the engine of an organization. It transforms a static mission statement into a shared, living culture. It moves a group from **cooperation** (working near each other) to **collaboration** (working with each other toward a specific vision).

Communication advances a group and galvanizes its members by:

1. Aligning Purpose with Action

Without clear communication, a mission statement is just "wall art." To advance, every member must understand how their specific task contributes to the larger goal.

The "Why" Factor: Galvanization happens when people stop asking "What do I do?" and start understanding "Why does this matter?"

Consistency: Repeated messaging of core values ensures that when obstacles arise, the team stays focused on the long-term objective rather than getting bogged down in short-term friction.

2. Building Trust

A group is only as strong as its level of internal trust. Transparent communication, especially regarding challenges or shifts in strategy, creates an environment where members feel safe.

Open Feedback: Organizations advance when communication flows **upward**, not just downward. When volunteers or employees feel heard, their "buy-in" increases exponentially.

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Reducing Ambiguity: Uncertainty is the greatest killer of morale. Clear communication about roles, expectations, and changes prevents the "rumor mill" from dismantling group unity.

3. Creating "Ambassador" Energy

Communication isn't just internal; it's how your group interacts with the world.

Shared Narrative: When everyone uses the same "story" to describe the organization, the external impact is magnified.

Recognition as Fuel: Regularly communicating wins, both big and small, validates the group's hard work. Publicly acknowledging a volunteer's impact, for example, reinforces their commitment and inspires others to step up.

4. Facilitating Agility

In a fast-changing environment (like the arts or non-profit sectors), communication allows for "pivoting" without losing momentum.

Rapid Information Sharing: If a group is well-connected through modern tools (like OVI's recommended digital strategies), they can respond to crises or opportunities in real-time.

Resource Efficiency: Better communication prevents the "silo effect," where two parts of the same organization are accidentally working at cross-purposes or duplicating efforts.

"Communication is the solvent of all problems and is the foundation for personal development." —Peter Drucker



Opera Volunteer Voice

is the newsletter publication of Opera Volunteers International.

- ▶ Visit us at our website: operavolunteers.org
- ▶ Send inquiries to: ovquestions@gmail.com
- ▶ Newsletter submissions: newsletter@operavolunteers.org with subject line: OVI News Submission

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Leadership-Level

Jerry Bohannon

Rhonda Catanzaro

Erika Erich

The Guild of the Glimmerglass Festival in Memory of Mary Dunkle

Friends of OVI

Sophia Johnson

Marlene McAllister

Anne Prokopovych

Danielle Di Stefano



Regional News: South Central Region



The Opera Theatre of Saint Louis Guild has launched the **Guild Partners Program (GPP)** for this year's Festival Season (May and June 2026). This volunteer-led program offers visiting Guild members curated insights into the many experiences available at OTSL performances. It will connect our visitors with our own Guild members as guides and companions for an experience like none other in our garden and theatre.

From picnic menus and dining under the festival tent to local hotel recommendations and tips on meeting the artists, our Guild members are here to help. We are ready to assist you in every way to enhance your enjoyment of the Festival Season. For a brief overview of *most* of the opportunities for each performance, visit <https://opera-stl.org/plan-your-visit/>.

Through the GPP, we hope to form lasting relationships with our visitors and demonstrate our appreciation for all opera volunteers. For more information on the program, please contact Deanna Stevenson, Chair of National Opera Activities guild@opera-stl.org.

Opera Theatre of Saint Louis Guild
extends a welcome to any
opera guild member in the country.