

# THE OPERA VOLUNTEER VOICE

July 2025  
Vol. 49, Number 3

The official newsletter of  
*Opera Volunteers  
International*



The Finale is Here! Webinar July 14 9 am PT / 11 am CT / 12 pm ET

## The Volunteer Multiplier: Elevate Your Impact by Leveraging Skills with Purpose

### You're invited:



**Rhonda Sweeney**  
Nonprofit Leader & Opera Advocate

In partnership with The Metropolitan Opera, we're thrilled to invite you to Opera Volunteers International's (OVI) third webinar designed to explore the evolving role of volunteers in shaping the future of opera and the arts.

Nonprofit leader, Rhonda Sweeney, and Melissa Wegner of The Metropolitan Opera will lead a powerful conversation on transforming volunteers from behind-the-scenes helpers into purpose-driven ambassadors.

Expect real-world insights, upskilling strategies, and inspiration from the best in the industry.

This session is free and open to all OVI members, opera volunteers, and arts leaders. [Register Here](#)



**Melissa Wegner**  
Executive Director at The Metropolitan Opera's Lindemann Young Artist Development Program and the Laffont Competition

Rhonda takes us on a journey through what it takes to elevate opera volunteers from worker to unshakable advocate. She then welcomes Melissa Wegner of The Metropolitan Opera, who will share actionable insights from her work with emerging talent, together offering practical strategies for upskilling, building purpose-driven programs, and expanding your impact in your organization.

This inspiring session marks the grand finale of Opera Volunteers International's three-part 2025 Volunteer Advocacy Webinar Series.

Don't miss this opportunity to learn from two of the industry's most respected leaders in opera and volunteer engagement.

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## Become Certified

Did you attend the first two events? Complete the series and earn an **OVI Certificate of Completion in Volunteer Advocacy** - a distinguished acknowledgment from OVI, celebrating your commitment to strengthening and growing the opera volunteer community.

## From the President:



**A**lthough arts organizations continue to face challenges, our members returned from Opera Conference 2025 ready to share the insights and ideas they gathered in Memphis. Our conference speakers, including **Dr. James Catanzaro**, **Jason Hardy**, **Tyler**

**McKenzie**, **Janice Seele**, **Shelbi Sellers**, and **Carol Steigelman** presented unique perspectives on community engagement through volunteer participation. We share photos and memories from a great week together.

Summer offers a time to reflect on the past season and look forward to what's to come. Our front page story features our upcoming webinar OVI Past President and nonprofit leader, **Rhonda Sweeney**, along with **Melissa Wegner**, Executive Director of the Metropolitan Opera's Lindemann Young Artist Development Program and the Laffont Competition, who will guide us in a powerful conversation on transforming volunteers from behind the scenes helpers into purpose-driven ambassadors. **Join us on July 14th at this Zoom Webinar.**

A heartfelt thank-you, and a sad farewell to one of our great volunteers, **Barbara Eckel**. Her service to this organization, and the **Chicago Lyric Opera's Chapters' Executive Board** spanned decades of dedicated volunteer service. We honor her accomplishments as we fondly remember her.

Your board strives to bring you the latest and best in volunteering. If you are interested in serving on our Board of Directors, please contact Rhonda Sweeney at [nominations@operavolunteers.org](mailto:nominations@operavolunteers.org).

Thanks for being an opera volunteer!

*Mary Svela*

## Regional Spotlight

Getting to Know You ....

South Central Regional Director

**Jerry Bohannon**



Jerry lives in Katy, Texas. He has been on the Guild Board of Houston Grand Opera (HGO) for many years, where he held several positions, including president. He also serves on HGO's Donor Engagement Committee.

A 1995 TV performance by Cecilia Bartoli introduced him to opera, and he has been an opera subscriber ever since.

Looking for a way to engage with others who shared his interest in opera, he became a volunteer at the invitation of several people in the HGO Guild. He stays engaged because he believes in the mission, Joining the board of OVI has enabled him to expand that reach to a regional and national level. Participating with OVI's board members has been an enriching experience.

Jerry's retirement from the upstream segment oil and gas industry has enabled him to spend time with something he truly loves.

Visit our website to view 2024-25 grants and Recognition Recipients

### Grants

<https://www.operavolunteers.org/grants-and-awards/matching-grants-program/>

Fund projects that can benefit your opera volunteer group or support your Opera Company and community.

### Partner in Excellence:

<https://www.operavolunteers.org/grants-and-awards/partners-in-excellence/>

Is there an individual your group would like to honor or a special anniversary to celebrate.

### Project of Special Merit:

<https://www.operavolunteers.org/grants-and-awards/projects-of-special-merit/>

Did your group create a unique? Let us know about it so we can recognize you and share your great idea.

----- Find us on the internet at [www.OperaVolunteers.org](http://www.OperaVolunteers.org) -----



*Barb set up and hosted this OVI information table at Opera Conference 2025 in Memphis in May. She designed the signs, brochures and resources.*

### Remembering Barb Eckel for a Lifetime of Service

Opera Volunteers International and the **Lyric Opera of Chicago Chapters** lost a vital member with the unexpected passing of **Barbara Eckel**, 82, on June 8, 2025. Her passion for enriching the experience of opera volunteers everywhere during her 25 years of service to OVI, and even longer to Lyric Opera, have left an indelible mark and are an inspiration for those of us who are dedicated to serving the arts as volunteers.



**Barb Eckel** was truly a volunteer's volunteer. She reveled in being on the front lines, being a "worker bee", as she liked to call it. She channeled her numerous abilities and interests into the things she loved, e.g. opera. At Lyric Opera she took on the responsibility of creating and expanding the running of its *OPERA shop* and joyfully participating in the *Operathon* radio fundraising marathons. As she worked her way up in the organization from doer to leader, and then, nationally, to the OVI board, she was constantly on the lookout for significant volunteer information to share with her groups. This dedication and passion transformed her from a near-luddite to the master of the OVI website and the email distribution of essential information.

She served as President of the Evanston Chapter of the Lyric Opera of Chicago volunteer group, and her husband, John, assumed the Treasurer's duties for their Chapter. She loved the feeling of participating in the activities of an exciting artistic endeavor such as Lyric, and expanded her activities to Lyric's Chapters' Executive Board, where she served, for the past several years, as President. One of Barb's final projects was *Kudo's for the Chorus*, as a way for Lyric's volunteers to connect with and recognize the remarkable performing artists that distinguish the company.

In 2000, Barb began to represent Chicago at OVI meetings and conferences, joining the OVI board in 2003 as **Director of Projects of Special Merit**. This early position inspired her with the possibilities for sharing great volunteer ideas with a wider membership in OVI. Sharing volunteer excellence and creativity became an important goal for her long years of service to our organization.

She used her expertise in crafting clear communication to benefit OVI through emails, website, brochures, signs, meeting and conference planning, as well as through maintaining documents from our history such as Bylaws, Policies and Procedures, and a newsletter archive. She was **Director of Publications** in 2006-09, **Director of Membership Services** 2009-2010, **Vice President of Communications** 2010-13, and **Director of Resources** from 2013-present. Her work on the OVI website redevelopment and redesign took months of planning, in addition to learning the website development tool, Wordpress.

## Barbara Eckel

Barb enjoyed travel, and participated in almost every conference and focus meeting OVI has held in the last 25 years. With Past-President Fern Grauer, she hosted a successful Focus Meeting in Chicago in 2010, and organized the Boston Focus Meeting in 2019.

In 2020, Barb earned OVI's highest honor, the **BRAVO Award**:

*“in recognition of her exceptional service throughout her many years as an OVI member. Her contributions to OVI include a wide range of achievements, significantly contributing to the Mission, growth and success of OVI as a volunteer organization.”*

Volunteers nationwide perform extraordinary service in support of their opera guilds, leagues, companies and opera in general. Opera Volunteers International itself created the BRAVO Award to pay tribute to individuals who make outstanding and unusual contributions in service to OVI.

Like many volunteers, Barb used her own time, resources, and talents, to make opera volunteering more effective and meaningful for all of us who love the work.



She will be sorely missed in our hearts and our organization.

We are grateful for everything she did, and are thankful that we were able to honor her many contributions and accomplishments with the Bravo Award while she was still with us.

If you are inspired by Barb's story, please consider dedicating your service or donating to OVI or any service organization that you love.



## Recognizing Greatness of Your Volunteers

OVI can help you honor the achievements of your significant individuals and milestones with our Partners In Excellence award. 2025-26 applications will be available in the near future.

For more information, and award criteria go to:

<https://www.operavolunteers.org/grants-and-awards/partners-in-excellence/>

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# Opera Conference 2025 Recap



## Performances, Sightseeing, Seeing Old Friends and Making New ones, Regenerating, Learning, Representing, and Recognizing the Outstanding Accomplishments of Opera Volunteers.

### Celebrating a Strong OVI Presence at the Opera America Conference in Memphis, this year.

The Opera Volunteers International track at the 2025 Opera America conference in Memphis was a resounding success, thanks to the energy, professionalism, and deep commitment of an extraordinary team of volunteers and supporters.

#### Setting the Tone

We began on a high note at Wednesday morning's OVI Board meeting, where **Rhonda Sweeney** reminded us that our mission is to ensure OVI was "seen" in the most favorable light. Her message was beneficial to first-time conference participants.

#### Outstanding Sessions and Thought Leadership

OVI Regional Director Tyler McKenzie and OPSL Guild President Janice Seele delivered a compelling session on *Innovative Volunteer Management Strategies*, wowing us with the great volunteer work happening for **Opera Theatre of St. Louis**. Their handout was packed with practical ideas. We hope to invite them to lead a fall webinar.



Longtime OVI friend **Carol Steigelman**, from the Glimmerglass Festival, led a terrific session on *"Successful Volunteer Initiatives to Educate and Involve Our Communities."* Carol made sure attendees were aware of OVI's broader work—her advocacy and leadership were deeply appreciated. **Jim Catanzaro** led a dynamic conversation with **Jason Hardy, CEO of Knoxville Opera**, on *Volunteers Reaching a Wider Audience*. The session remained lively and engaging right to the final minute.

## Conference



Opera Memphis' **Shelbi Sellers'** Thursday session, "*The Force Multiplier of Volunteers in Opera*," explained how Opera Memphis is reaching deep into the community for connections and volunteers. Her Memphis walking tour was full—and a highlight for many attendees.

### Recognition and Community

**Cindy Niggemeyer** beautifully presented this year's *Partners in Excellence Awards* during our OVI luncheon, which was intimate and thoroughly enjoyable. The restaurant, just a short walk from the Peabody, offered a lovely setting, and the great weather added to the ambiance. **Rhonda Cantanzaro** emceed the luncheon, and laughter and conversation flowed freely—it was clear how much everyone appreciated the time together. **Lisa Hagstrom, Jason Hardy, Sara Fabick, and Carol Steigleman** were present to receive their PIE and PSM Awards in person—always a treat!

### Gratitude Behind the Scenes

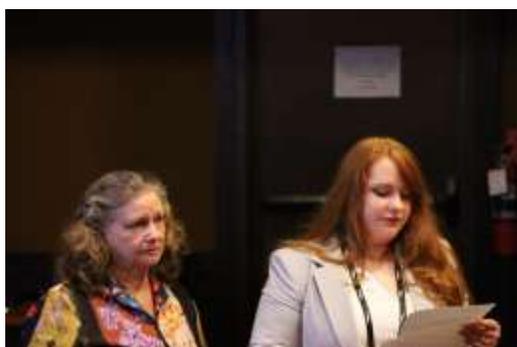
Special thanks go to **Lorena Zapata** and **President Mary Sveta** for their tireless behind-the-scenes work. Their efforts were essential to the success of our sessions and events.

**Barb Eckel** was our tech hero, juggling microphones, tripods, and even supplying goodies for our exhibit table. And **Rick Greenman** deserves a standing ovation for his widely praised newsletters and his logistical wizardry (including banner duty!).

We were also thrilled to see **Marlene McAllister** and her friends, **Danette Dillon, Kathryn Mears,** and **Patricia Goble-Duncan**, from **Tulsa Opera Guild** attend every OVI session—a fantastic show of support that did not go unnoticed.

We are grateful to Opera America for their support of our work!

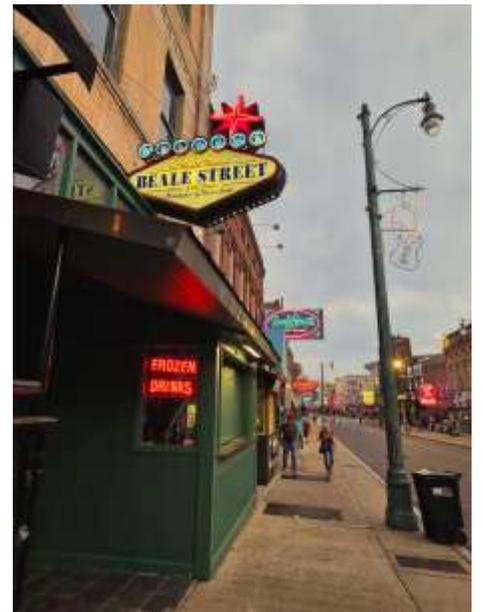
This year's OVI presence at the conference reminded us of what's possible when dedicated volunteers come together with passion and purpose.



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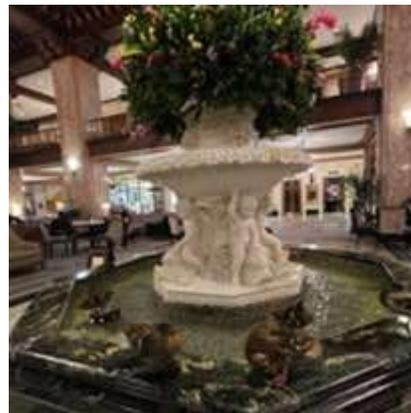
# More from Memphis

*The Biggest Little City .... Home of the Blues*



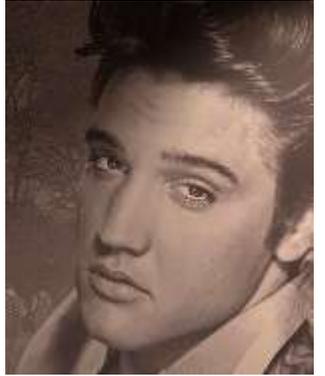
----- Find us on the internet at [www.OperaVolunteers.org](http://www.OperaVolunteers.org) -----

# Memphis Opera and Peabody Hotel



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# Civil Rights Museum, Graceland, Memphis Zoo



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