

Vitamin L News

Spring 2010



Elizabeth Stilwell



Barbara Lifton



“Friends of Vitamin L” Event Draws Supporters, Friends, Community Leaders

Vitamin L supporters, friends, and community leaders packed Ithaca’s landmark Moosewood Restaurant on Sunday, February 14, for a gala Valentine’s Day celebration. (Of course... the “L” stands for love!) More than 100 attendees gathered to pay tribute to our transformative work—whose impact has inspired thousands of children locally, nationally, and even globally. This “Friends of Vitamin L” event, complete with sumptuous hors d’oeuvres and a lovely sampling of Damiani wines, brought together speakers, chorus members, Vitamin L alumni, educators, long-time friends of the Vitamin L Project, and dignitaries from the Ithaca community.

The mood was festive, and love and enthusiasm filled the room as alumni chorus member (and brand new dad) Charlie Blake, who served as emcee, welcomed guests and introduced the first speaker, Chris Petto-grasso, principal of R. C. Buckley Elementary School in Lansing, NY. She offered heartfelt and inspiring comments about the value of Vitamin L music for her students, adding that

a Vitamin L concert is part of their first day of school in September. Jan Nigro and chorus members then sang a few songs, including “I Want to Say Thanks”—with new lyrics composed especially for the occasion!

Two women were presented with our Vitamin L Community Award in recognition of their significant contributions to Vitamin L. Elizabeth Stilwell was honored as a founding advisory board member and long-term Vitamin L volunteer. Although most recently Elizabeth played an instrumental role in planning and helping with our 20th birthday year activities, she has been a steadfast ally for over 17 years, remaining involved for years after her children, Kaitlin and Brian, became alumni. Elizabeth served area youth and Cornell students for 18 years as the director of Cornell’s Early Childhood Center and also taught at TC3 for five years. She currently touches children’s lives through teacher training and staff development efforts for the Ithaca City School District, Tompkins Community Action, and Early Head Start. In

addition, she is serving students at Cornell as teaching liaison/lecturer in the department of human development, as well as through her publications and role-modeling. Her childhood development expertise, advocacy, and compassion have enriched Vitamin L in countless ways, for which we are deeply grateful.

New York State Assemblywoman Barbara Lifton was the next award recipient. She is completing her fourth term representing the 125th Assembly District, which includes Tompkins County, where Vitamin L is based. She taught high school English for nine years and then served as chief of staff to Assemblyman Marty Luster for 14 years. The mother of two and grandmother of three, she works tirelessly for the people of New York State. She has been consistently supportive of Vitamin L and helped procure an education grant for Vitamin L to upgrade computer and camera equipment a few years ago. We thank her for this support—and for all her work for children and families.

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From a Current Vitamin L Member... Magic and Meaning: Seven Years with Vitamin L

After an hour's drive in the cramped backseat of a minivan, we finally arrived in Maine, New York. It was warm outside, and the sun was shining brilliantly. We pulled into the school parking lot and walked into the building, each of us carrying or wearing a brightly-colored t-shirt. At the main office, we announced that we were "members of Vitamin L," and were shown to the school gymnasium, where our sound equipment had already been set up. After getting our bearings, we began the sound check, filling the gymnasium with exciting music.

The elementary-school students and their teachers arrived, sitting in neat rows on the gym floor and lining the walls. Silence fell over the room as the concert began. We sang about kindness, honesty, and mutual respect, our words bouncing along the walls, which were plastered with similar kid-friendly reminders to be kind, truthful, and respectful.

At this concert, I was in sixth grade, and was a new member of Vitamin L. During the performance, despite being nervous, I felt exhilarated, and excited to be able to connect with other kids. I found it easy to smile and interact with the audience, simply because the messages we sang about and the audience's reaction were inspiring. Now, I have spent nearly seven years as a member of Vitamin L, and I still feel the same way.

In my experience, I have seen a clear demonstration that Vitamin L's messages have a positive effect on everyone they touch. At the same time, Vitamin L also has a profound impact on its chorus members. This organization really does help its members become "changemakers," a relatively new term coined by the Ashoka Foundation. I know that Vitamin L has been

an integral part of my adolescent years, and has helped me become a more responsible, involved global citizen.

I see middle school as a time when many children need to be reminded of the important values that Vitamin L encompasses. Singing as part of the chorus, we are infused with these ideas, and are able to use them in our own lives, while still sharing them with younger kids.

Chorus members have a myriad of opportunities to contribute to Vitamin L. As a tenth grader, I joined the Advisory Board as a youth board member. Immediately, I was offered a lot of responsibility. I was required to attend regular board meetings and generally serve as a representative for all chorus members. I was then able to take on more tasks, and served as one of the primary organizers of a chorus member buddy system. In regular discussions, board members are always eager to hear from the youth representatives. They are eager for the feedback and unique perspective that we can offer.

I have been empowered by Vitamin L and my experience in it. As a chorus member, I have been given the unique opportunity to inspire other youth in concerts, make new friends, and take on additional responsibilities, such as leading training rehearsals. At board meetings, youth members can offer their ideas and perspectives and learn more about the behind-the-scenes work involved in Vitamin L.

In fall of 2009, I returned with Vitamin L to perform at that same elementary school in Maine. Once again, we performed for students and teachers. Once again, a few butterflies flew around in my stomach. Once again, I found myself smiling and being excited for the show.



Next year, I'm headed off to college, and I feel well-prepared, knowing that my experiences in Vitamin L will stay with me. I certainly recognize the benefit that our music has for its listeners. Little else compares to the magic of the happiness of the children and adults we perform for. Vitamin L allows its members to grow and thrive as well, while learning, singing, and spreading goodwill.

-- Beal St. George, Senior, Lehman Alternative Community School

In 2009, Vitamin L:

- * Performed 46 concerts
- * Reached 11,150 youth & 3,000 adults in concerts
- * Gave leadership and performing opportunities to our 80 chorus members.

THE GRATITUDE REPORT

In the last six months The Vitamin L Project received donations from numerous individuals and groups, including grants of \$5,000.00 from the Triad Foundation, \$10,000.00 and \$5,000.00 from Foundations that wish to remain anonymous, and \$500.00 from The Service League. In addition, Bob Becker Productions donated fantastic professional editing of video footage from our 20th Birthday Concerts to create brand new video clips for our website and Facebook page.

A HEARTFELT THANK YOU TO ALL OF OUR SUPPORTERS AND VOLUNTEERS!

From a Vitamin L alumna... “Tell me, what will you offer today?”

This is one line in the midst of the many messages that Vitamin L songs have brought me since my early involvement at age 9. This line, however, has particularly molded my outlook on my international lifestyle for the past four years. The song “Mighty Power” offers a simple reminder that “every little bit counts,” and it has given me the perspective to be resilient through difficult situations, and to appreciate my moments of fascination and happiness.

Since 2006, I have been working and living abroad in Madagascar. Through my work with a USAID-funded project, I used radio as a medium to support teacher training and quality education for elementary-age students. This consisted of writing model lessons, songs, games, and activities that are broadcast over national radio, providing educational access for those in rural, underserved areas. Vitamin L songs have been inspiration for my work and have been utilized as teacher support tools for English Language Learning and Civic Education. My work afforded me many levels of involvement, as I was both a leader, building a structure to sustain radio education, and a creative thinker, directly working with the people I intended to serve. I loved understanding and working within the various tiers of my organization. Unfortunately, in early 2009, a political crisis hit Madagascar, flinging the country into complete disorder. Overnight, I watched the rising country, and with it, the structure I had worked to build, literally burn to the ground.

In times of loss, humanity has the tendency to focus on the feeling of missing what was once there. During the time of crisis, I had time to reflect and to critically assess the mark I want to make on the world. While living in constant stress and often needing to click into survival mode, I realized that my focus should not be on the “national initiative,” nor should it be on obtaining numbers, like the “thou-



Nathalie teaching songs to children in Madagascar

sands of teachers and students impacted.”

Rather, my focus should be on the opportunity to make a difference in the lives of individuals, the lives I may not know I influence. Although this mentality is obvious to some, I find that I often get caught up in the need to achieve more, neglecting my appreciation of the little things that connect us with humanity, allowing us to grow, learn, and find meaning.

My lifelong experience as a member and avid supporter of Vitamin L has helped remind me that it is about being the best I can be in the face of these challenges. It is about setting aside worry about the scale of my impact and focusing on its depth. If I can inspire confidence, a love for learning, and creative thinking in one primary school child, my energy and efforts are and have been worth it. By building awareness of those we impact directly or indirectly through our actions, we can recognize that “we’ve got the power every day in what we do and what we say.”

I have the lyrics to “Mighty Power” printed and hanging on both my bedroom and office wall—a daily reminder to remember what is meaningful:

people. It has been the love, thoughts, and care for the ones in my life that have helped get me through my toughest times and have helped me enjoy my best times. To this day, there are times when I listen to Vitamin L music; the songs keep me grounded even when life’s pace resembles a whirlwind.

Old or young, living near or far, we all have something to contribute to the world. My role as a “global citizen” is to give back to other people. Everyone has that capacity to push the world in the right direction, even through the seemingly smallest of actions, like putting a smile on a Malagasy child’s face. - Nathalie Louge

Nathalie became a member of Vitamin L at the age of 9, yet her love for the group began when she was 5. She continued singing with Vitamin L through high school and college. After getting her degree in Human Development at Cornell, she moved to Madagascar to pursue her interests in international education and development. She is now living and working for a USAID project on educational radio in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Please support our unique outreach, service, and leadership work by making a tax-deductible donation online at www.vitaminL.org, or to:

The Vitamin L Project • 105 King St. • Ithaca, NY 14850 • Thank You!

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As the event came to a close, there was a special surprise in store. Dan Lamb, aide to U.S. Representative Maurice Hinchey, along with Tompkins County Administrator (and Vitamin L mom) Paula Younger, announced that on January 27, 2010, Mr. Hinchey read a beautiful tribute into the permanent Congressional Record of the United States honoring Vitamin L and Jan and Janice Nigro "for their unwavering commitment to improving their community" and for their 20 years of service. Part of the tribute stated: "Vitamin L encourages children to think about moral issues in a non-threatening, fun, and very personal way. By singing songs, watching the Vitamin L Chorus act out scenes of things like the consequences of 'jumping to conclusions,' and having opportunities to talk with Vitamin L Chorus members, young audiences see the importance of valuing positive character and moral behavior."

The Nigros were deeply touched by this gesture of appreciation, and they received a plaque and copies of the Congressional Record as keepsakes. Special thanks go to the hardworking members of the Vitamin L fundraising committee, as well as to the event sponsors, Foster Custom Kitchens, Audrey Edelman Realty USA, and two anonymous donors. Thank you to Damiani Winery for the libations and Moosewood for its gracious hospitality—and to the many others, including Wegmans and CTB, who helped make this such a joyous celebration!



MORE NEWS!

* View Concert video clips
at vitaminL.org
and on our Facebook page!

*Join us for our
Ithaca Festival concert on Sat. June 5
at 1:00 p.m. at the
Bernie Milton Pavilion
on the Ithaca Commons

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Inspiring children since 1989!

**for concert schedule
and more info:
www.vitaminL.org**

The Vitamin L Project is a Project of The Center for Transformative Action in Ithaca, New York