

Pizarro: Remembering Irene Dalis' lasting arts legacy

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Friends, family and fans have been expressing their gratitude for the life of Opera San Jose founder Irene Dalis since news of her death Sunday at age 89.

A lot has been shared through social media networks like Facebook and Twitter, and when you step back, you can get the sense of the huge number of people whose lives she touched, whether they were singers to whom she gave her first break or students who saw their first opera because of her.

On Facebook, Ben Miyaji recalled meeting Miss Dalis -- as everyone called her -- more than 20 years ago during his first term as a member of San Jose's arts commission. "I was completely in awe of Irene's dynamic personality, and her deep caring for the arts community is what we all should strive to achieve," he wrote.

I remember also being in awe of her when we first met -- and petrified to be on stage at a lighthearted roast for her 85th birthday party at the San Jose Improv. Another stunner was when I walked through the Grill on the Alley in downtown San Jose one afternoon to discover Dalis at lunch with Linda Ronstadt, the two comparing notes on singers and sharing their admiration for San Jose.

The annual Irene Dalis Vocal Competition each spring became another way she helped launch the careers of emerging singers, and it remains a great legacy for her. So is the California Theatre, a grand venue that is Opera San Jose's home. It was restored more than a decade ago with funding from the city and the Packard Humanities Institute, but insiders know that it never would have happened without Irene Dalis. And that can be said about so much of the arts in San Jose.