

SJSU Remembers Irene Dalis

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Irene Dalis

San Jose lost one of its finest teachers Sunday with the death of Irene Dalis, '46 Music. The acclaimed opera star, former professor, and founder of Opera San Jose was 89.



Irene Dalis poured all of her energy into providing young people with the greatest gift any teacher can give, the gift of opportunity," President Mohammad Qayoumi said.

Raised on Delmas Avenue on downtown's edge, Dalis arrived at San Jose State with the intention of studying piano.

An older sister encouraged her to pursue a master's in music education at Columbia University in New York. While a Fulbright Scholar in Italy, Dalis auditioned as a singer.

Finding her voice

She went on to spend more than two decades as the highest-paid mezzo-soprano with the Metropolitan Opera, sharing the stages with superstars such as Leontyne Price and Placido Domingo.



It's hard to know when you are young what your real talent is," **Dalis told the Spartan Daily in 2010.** "Don't be surprised to find that you don't end up doing what you set out to do."

After retiring in 1976, she came home to San Jose with her husband and daughter. Soon thereafter, SJSU President John H. Bunzel invited Dalis to return to her alma mater as a professor of music.

She didn't teach voice, sensing her vocal technique was specific to her. Instead, Dalis drew on San Jose State's homegrown talent to build an opera workshop that developed so many strong singers that she sought an even larger stage for them.

Dalis founded Opera San Jose in 1984, providing her singers with all the support they needed to grow, including two-year residencies and housing.

Commitment

At the same time, she remained deeply committed to San Jose State, inviting students to audition for Opera San Jose principal and second roles and chorus in addition to providing props and costumes for campus productions.

"The effect she had had on my life was tremendous," said Chloe Smart, '14 Vocal Performance. "She was always supportive of me and constantly let me know that she was on my side. As a young singer, I can't tell you how important those words were to me at that time and even now."

She also recommended that a mezzo-soprano she hand-picked for Opera San Jose take on the campus position Dalis once held.



She changed my life," said Layna Chianakas, an Illinois native who made San Jose her home after becoming a resident artist with the company in 1995, and director of the university's Opera Theatre program in 2007.

The Marriage of Figaro was the program's first performance under Chianakas in 2012. Dalis attended, although she was still struggling to recover from a debilitating car crash in 2010.

"The curtains were still closed but tears were already streaming down her cheeks," Chianakas recalled. "She was so happy to see the program thriving."