

AURORA

A close-up portrait of Steve Holmberg, a middle-aged man with short, graying hair and glasses. He is wearing a dark blue polo shirt and is smiling slightly. The background is a soft-focus outdoor setting with green and yellow foliage.

**Steve Holmberg '89:
Still singing strong**

By Sam Bishop

Above: Steve Holmberg. UAF photo by Megan Bean.

Two minutes into an interview, Steve Holmberg was singing.

“You’ve gotta have heart!” he crooned across the phone from his home in Washington state.

The line comes from the musical “Damn Yankees,” which the Summer Fine Arts Camp at the University of Alaska Fairbanks staged when Holmberg participated as a high school student in the 1970s.

Holmberg’s heart and his penchant for song have drawn him back to UAF. Now retired from a teaching career, he has created a fund to support an endowed chair for a faculty member focused on voice and choir at the Department of Music.

“I didn’t want the programs – the things that I had an opportunity to do – to not be available,” Holmberg explained.

Those opportunities led him first to UAF and then into 25 years as an elementary school music teacher in Bellevue, Washington.

Holmberg’s ability to fund an endowed chair came from making good investment choices with his wife, Cynthia, who worked at Microsoft during those same years.

That investing did quite well, and they both retired in 2015. She died of metastatic breast cancer in 2021.



Holmberg signs an agreement with the UA Foundation on Sept. 23, 2021, in Camas, Washington. The agreement outlines how he will fund the Steve and Cynthia Holmberg Choral Director Endowment during the coming decade. UAF photo by Megan Bean.

Even before her death, they had begun giving back to their alma maters. But two of the schools, both small private institutions, had been forced to close for financial reasons.

That left UAF as the sole focus of the Holmbergs' educational philanthropy. A recently signed agreement with the UA Foundation has created the Steve and Cynthia Holmberg Choral Director Endowment, which will be funded during the coming decade. Such endowments typically require a minimum of \$2.5 million to support a faculty member.

Building a career

After high school, Holmberg spent two years at UAF as a music theater major before moving to Seattle to attend and then work for the Lutheran Bible Institute. That's where he met Cynthia.

Returning to Fairbanks in 1984, Holmberg went to work at a day care and for Grayline as a summer tour bus driver. He attended classes at UAF and earned a bachelor's degree in music education in December 1988.

Cynthia, a business administrator by training, moved to Fairbanks in 1985. She worked at a computer store, Microage, and then at the Fairbanks North Star Borough as comptroller.



Steve and Cynthia Holmberg hug in their Fairbanks apartment in 1989. Photo courtesy of Steve Holmberg.

Just as Holmberg graduated with his education degree, cuts in state education funding made entry-level teaching jobs hard to find in Fairbanks. So the couple moved back to the Seattle area.

Cynthia soon found a place at Microsoft, thanks to a connection from her computer work in Fairbanks.

She ended up managing some of the technical writing for the beta version of Windows 95.

When Microsoft began selling the software, it based the user manual on what she had compiled. More than 40 million copies were sold in the first year, back when desktop computers were far less common than today.

“So my wife was one of the most published writers in world history!” Holmberg said.

She went on to work as a management trainer in the information technology department — “training computer geeks how to manage people,” Holmberg said.

Holmberg, meanwhile, based himself at Clyde Hill Elementary School while teaching music in 11 other schools as well.

“I was the guy down on the floor with the kindergartners going ‘itsy-bitsy spider,’” he said. “Your job is to expose kids to the breadth of what is out there musically in the world and hope that some of it sticks.”

Three of his students have gone on to become professional opera singers. Another charted on iTunes for several years. Several direct music at schools and churches.

“You know you’re making an impact with kids when they swing by the school just to say hi,”

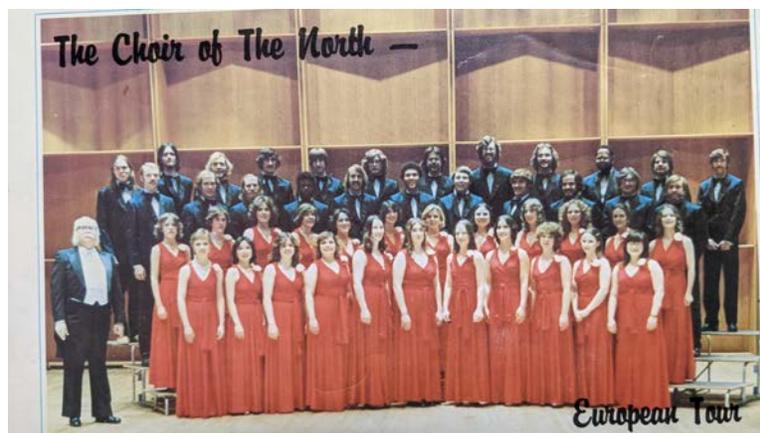
even after they are in high school or beyond, he said.

Holmberg said he wouldn't always recognize them, given that often more than a decade had passed since they'd last met.

"I'm going 'Hi?' Maybe if you shaved I might have a clue," he joked.

A foundational experience

Holmberg spent every summer at the UAF Summer Fine Arts Camp when he was in high school. It was a monthlong program of music, theater and art, much of it organized and taught by faculty from the respective UAF departments. In 1978, as a first-year student, he was a member of the Choir of the North when it toured Europe.



Charles Davis, UAF music professor and Choir of the North director, stands with the 1978 ensemble, which toured Europe. Steve Holmberg is second from the right in the lower row of men. Photo courtesy of Steve Holmberg.

“UAF was foundational in who I became as a music professional and in a lot of ways in who I became as a person,” he said.

Once in his teaching career, he found UAF had prepared him well.

“In many ways, I had a broader-based education than a lot of the other music education teachers I worked with. They went through a much more linear program,” he said. But at UAF, “you could have your fingers in a lot of different pots.”

In recent years, Holmberg began to worry about whether today’s students would benefit as he had.

“I started hearing about budget cutting and the financial straits the U was in,” he said.

Given his comfortable financial situation, he decided he could do something about it. He

wants the endowed chair to help sustain summer youth music programs.

“The programs that were most impactful for me were those summer-month programs in my high school days,” he said. “And that’s how you build the programs in Fairbanks. It’s why the Music Department has always had a good base of population – it’s because they had those summer programs where kids went, ‘Oh, I can go here.’”

Arts are essential to a high-quality education system in the community and at the university, Holmberg said.

“Which is one reason here in Fairbanks it’s scaring me to hear they’re trying to cut elementary music programming. It’s like, what, you’re trying to lobotomize yourself?” he said. “All kinds of research over the last 50 years has shown that if you want your kids to score higher in math, put them in a music class. If you want your kids to have better language skills, put them in the arts.”

Holmberg noted that Fairbanks' strong tradition of support for the arts predates oil money. He first attended the vibrant arts camp on campus in 1974, several years before production began at Prudhoe Bay.



Steve Holmberg and UAF Music Department Chair Jaunelle Cellaire. UAF photo by Leif Van Cise.

The UAF Summer Music Academy, today's version of the program Holmberg attended, is directed by Jaunelle Cellaire, the department's chair and professor of voice.

Cellaire has known Holmberg's parents, Al and Nancy, for years. She sometimes helps bring singers to the Fairbanks Lutheran Church, where they attend.

But she first met Steve Holmberg in 2019. He mentioned then that he would like to donate to the department. COVID-19 shut down everything soon afterward. Celaire didn't think much about it again until she was invited to a meeting with Holmberg on campus in July 2021.

"I get to see Steve, sweet, it's been two years, great, you know," she said. "It never clicked until he said, 'Yeah, I'd like to endow a chair.'"

"And then he started talking about his wife, and the tears came," she said. "I'm sobbing like a newborn baby."

Before the meeting, Celaire had been in the midst of directing an opera class on campus for the Fairbanks Summer Arts Festival. She told the class she'd be right back, never expecting what was coming.

"And I come back, and my eyes are puffed out to here," she said, holding her hands in front of her face.

A community celebration

Holmberg returned to Fairbanks to attend a special Choir of the North recital on April 10 in the Davis Concert Hall.

Planning for the event, a thank-you to UAF music scholarship donors, unexpectedly illustrated to those involved just how connected the world can be.

The Choir of the North joins the UAF String Ensemble for a performance of "Flying Free," by Don Besig, during the UAF Music Celebration on April 10, 2022. UAF photo by Leif Van Cise



Celaire said the recital was originally scheduled for April 2020, but the COVID-19 pandemic canceled it.

Sparked by Holmberg's donation, the department revived the idea.

Celaire asked **Emerson Eads '11, '13**, a faculty member at Minot State University, to write a piece to celebrate the gift. Holmberg sang with Eads' parents in Fairbanks decades ago, and Holmberg's cousin's husband is a former Minot president.

Eads agreed to write the music. "He said, 'Here's the deal, Jaunelle – I can write music until the cows come home, but I need text,'" Celaire said. "I went, 'Oh right, there's that.'"

So, at Eads' suggestion, Celaire asked Holmberg to name some poets that he appreciates. Among the poets Holmberg offered was Meta Herrick Carlson, whose work was excerpted on a card he received after his wife died.



*Clockwise from top: Madeline Andriesen, a vocal performance and music education student, speaks at the April 10 event in the Charles Davis Concert Hall on the Fairbanks campus; Holmberg speaks with students in the Regents' Great Hall; and faculty members Ann Schaefer, on piano, and **Sean Dowgray '15**, on marimba, perform "Danse Macabre" by Camille Saint-Saens. UAF photos by Leif Van Cise.*



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"It so expressed so much of what I was going through after my wife passed," Holmberg said,

his voice breaking. “Talking about the now, what I’m feeling now, what I probably will be feeling later and then setting up hope that, yeah, life does go on, life moves on but yet they’re not gone, they’re not forgotten.”

He sent the excerpt to Celaire, who passed it to Eads.

“He said ‘I know just what I’d do with that,’” Holmberg said. “Less than two weeks later he’s got a piece of music written.”

Holmberg, in later thanking Carlson for allowing the use of her poem, mentioned that he now attends Messiah Lutheran Church in Vancouver, Washington.

“She responds back, ‘Oh, if you’re at Messiah, then your new pastoral intern (the woman training to be pastor) has been the nanny for my kids for the last two years,’” Holmberg said.

Then he discovered that Carlson’s great aunt years ago had been Holmberg’s father’s church choir director in the tiny town of Cottonwood,

Minnesota. And one of Carlson's relatives had been a bridesmaid in his parents' wedding.

To top that, while talking to a neighbor who directs music for an Episcopal church in Vancouver, Holmberg mentioned the upcoming performance by the Choir of the North.

"She says, 'Oh that's Jaunelle's choir. We were doctoral students back in Michigan together,'" he said.

"I'm just going 'How small does this world get?'" he said.

That small world seems to be giving Holmberg a big hug — a much-needed and well-deserved one.



At left, poet Meta Carlson, left, joins Holmberg, composer Emerson Eads and Cellaire at a reception in the Chancellor's House. At right, a poster describes the endowment created by Holmberg. UAF photos by Leif Van Cise.

“We grieve and we mourn and we miss and we’re sad,” Cellaire said before the concert in April. “However, we get to take this situation and this tragedy and just, like, be happy and celebrate. It truly is a celebration.”

Moving moments

The April 10 event at the Davis Concert Hall featured 11 different pieces to acknowledge Holmberg and other Music Department benefactors.

Holmberg, speaking a few days afterward, said he was moved from the moment **Dorli McWayne '83** opened the concert with his all-time favorite flute piece. It was a selection from a suite by composer Claude Bolling that famed flautist Jean-Pierre Rampal had recorded.

“I was so busy chatting with people that I didn’t actually get a chance to look at the program before it started,” Holmberg said. “When she started, I was like ‘Oooh.’”

Both composer Eads and poet Carlson attended the event. Holmberg marveled at what they, Cellaire and the choir did with “Give Me Room,” the piece dedicated to his wife.

Carlson’s poem ends with a line noting that the departed are “still present across time and space.”

“What Emerson did was set it up so they’re hitting this ‘space,’ ‘space,’ ‘space,’ in all the harmonies,” Holmberg said, “but then he has some of the choir members whispering the word ‘space,’ ‘space,’ ‘space,’ and it’s these voices —

there but not there. I was taken by it. I was like
'Wow.'



Holmberg stands to acknowledge Celaire and performers at the UAF Music Celebration on April 10 in the Davis Concert Hall. UAF photo by Leif Van Cise.





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