

by Anne Miller | photo by Amanda Cribdon Photography

## Souzann McMillan: Giving Youth a Voice

No doubt, many readers can relate to this story. As a child, I was introverted and shy, petrified to speak in front of a class of my peers. That feeling stayed with me long afterwards and I regret the many moments I failed to speak up about topics important to me.

Fortunately, many people who have worked with Souzann McMillan have not lost those opportunities. For 60 years, Souzann has been teaching speech arts and drama to foster public speaking skills, not only working with the very shy student but with the child dreaming of acting.

She's been remarkably successful for a number of reasons. To begin with, she intimately knows what she's talking about. As a shy child herself, she was afraid to call out to her friend for fear someone else might hear her. Her mother addressed her anxiety and introduced her to Dr. Leona Paterson, a renowned teacher of Speech Arts. Souzann has never looked back. Over the years, she earned diplomas in speech arts and drama and has taught hundreds of young people and adults, including police recruits, professionals and international students.

Above all, Souzann's success rests in her philosophy of teaching and in her abilities, values and nature. She is passionate about her work and cares deeply for each of her charges. A friend praises how "she has helped her students rise up to meet their full potential. Many of her students are so shy ... (but) she has the ability to bring them out of their shell and shine!"

Within her very being, Souzann believes that mastering public speaking is a critical life skill. Throughout her teaching, including with Speech Arts Victoria where she is a director and teacher, as well as volunteering over 25 years with the Greater Victoria Performing Arts Festival, she has witnessed how far reaching it is. Students leave with strong tools to carry throughout their lives – confidence, poise, the ability to present their thoughts and engage in healthy debate. Young women learn early that they have a voice.

Souzann is rewarded with accolades and thanks from students long after they've "left the nest." One former student talked of the lasting impact Souzann and her program has had on his life. Within the competitive environment of medical education, he sailed through challenging interviews with "personal storytelling, situational judgement and ... eloquent language." He got offers from each school he interviewed with and acknowledged that it wasn't luck that got him there. It was, in large part, to Souzann's "loving support, care and passion for teaching" him important life skills.



Today, Speech Arts Victoria is dealing with the challenges that Covid-19 has presented. They have moved to virtual learning and it's working well. It is safe and effective, allowing Souzann to hear her students' articulation and to see facial expressions up close. Going forward after Covid, this will be a platform they use more often.

For all educators and parents, this pandemic poses some fundamental questions. With change being a known entity, what do our youth need to learn? How can they be equipped to think on their feet and to speak their truth with confidence and clarity? Learning public speaking instills confidence and communication skills in people which carry on as they influence, teach and model their behaviour through parenting and every walk of life. This sounds like it should be a curriculum priority to me.

Souzann knows that she's doing important work. When she finishes a class, she tells herself how lucky she is to be doing a job that makes a difference to so many lives and that she actually loves. I'm thinking how lucky those students are to have such a passionate, thoughtful and skilled teacher.