

30 Brave Minutes Transcript: Episode 55

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“In the Singing Studio” with Dr. Rebecca Loar

Dr. Hersey

Welcome to *30 Brave Minutes*, a podcast of the College of Arts and Sciences at the University of North Carolina at Pembroke. In *30 Brave Minutes*, we'll give you something interesting to think about. I'm Joanna Hersey, Associate Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, and with me is Dean Richard Gay and Associate Dean Ashley Allen.

Joining us today is Dr. Rebecca Loar from my home Department of Music. Dr. Loar's research is in the area of vocal health, specifically the field of singing voice specialization. She works with singers who have been injured, or are suffering medical issues that affect their vocal instrument. Thank you Dr. Loar for being with us today.

Now, get ready for *30 Brave Minutes*.

Dr. Allen

Welcome, Dr. Loar, Becky, it's wonderful to have you with us. If you don't mind just tell us a little bit about yourself and how it is that you came to be at UNC Pembroke.

Dr. Loar

Wonderful. Thank you so much for having me today. I'm thrilled to be here with you guys. I have been teaching voice for over 20 years. Probably 25, actually, I don't want to count. This has been a long time! And I love it, I love working specifically one on one with singers, and in years past probably in the last several years, it's really come to my attention about vocal injury, and so when I was going through my doctorate specifically was focusing on that for my doctoral research. And came really strongly to this research of singing voice specialization.

But to specifically say how I came to UNCP, after getting the doctorate and receiving that in wonderful 2020, I was thrilled and lucky enough to be able to find this fantastic faculty to join and I'm thrilled to be a part of it. Everyone is very collaborative, very supportive, and the environment at UNCP is wonderful. So I'm thrilled to be a part of the faculty here.

Dr. Gay

It's so wonderful to hear that. Thank you so much. We're really pleased to have you as well. You're a great addition to the department.

Dr. Loar

Thank you.

Dr. Allen

So, Becky tell us a little bit more about this research on vocal health. I'm very fascinated by it. Especially considering there's a lot of people who are out there who do just pick up singing without

any kind of training. And how does that translate into them knowing how to care for themselves when it comes to vocal health?

Dr. Loar

Well, it's tricky. So everybody's gotta start somewhere right? And many, many people are out there singing all the time. They probably don't even want to admit it, they're singing in the car, they're singing in the shower or whatever, but a lot of, we have a lot of community engagement as far as singing. It's a wonderful way for us to engage. Whether that's in a religious aspect, church or synagogue, something like that, community choir, symphony chorus, many people remember singing in schools when they're younger and they just love to do it. So they continue to do it. So singing is universal. It's a wonderful way for us to connect with one another, especially post Covid, you know, when we couldn't, now, we can. And we just will sing, we're loud people anyway, and we'll sing all over everywhere. So we have a lot more community engagement now, now that choirs are back together.

But yes, the amateur singer caring for themselves, you know, we just know that often when we've done a lot, the first thing that our voice will do is tell us about it. Right? So, if we're dry at the end of the day, gosh, I need more water or I'm a little scratchy. I always say there's two things that our voice will tell us right away, when we haven't had enough water, and we haven't had enough sleep. Those two things will end up on the vocal cords faster than anything. And here in college, what do our kids not do? They don't drink water. They want to drink soda or coffee, which I'm very much a coffee addict, and they don't sleep, you know, so I have to remind them you got to sleep you got to drink water, but it really is the plight for everyone. You know, I often have gotten to the end of the day without all of my water too.

So, caring for our voice all day, is an important task. I'm talking about singing specifically, but many of us in education are professional voice users. We talk all day, and so the educator themselves, whether you're a math teacher, a coach, football coach, et cetera, they are absolutely using their voice at optimal levels all day long. So really, care for the professional voice user is a very important task. So speaking to that, you know, voice injuries can happen to anyone and they do. But it's most of the time, the singer that's going 'gee, my voice is not functioning how I want it to today' and we as singers, freak out, when the voice isn't doing what we want it to, when we're not able to hit those notes. All of a sudden they feel different. There's more work involved. Then red flags start going off for us, but with those red flags, the knowledge of what to do next is imperative.

And that's where we have a breakdown, many people don't know what to do next. Where to go, who can care for them? And so that's why it's important for us to know what doctors do care for the singing voice? So, most of the time, if we get a little snuffle or something like that, we end up going to an ear, nose or throat a doctor. And most of them will give us solid advice, you know, yes you've used your voice too much, rest, water. You see a theme here? Or, you know, here's some nasal sprays, you know, medical advice. But it's important for us as singers to know who we can go to, that really knows the optimal use of what the singing voice deals with, and potential injury, and so we say you would want to go to a laryngologist. Specifically, a voice doctor, not just E. N. T. which is ear, nose, and throat, otolaryngologist.

We want them to go to a laryngologist, and most of the time a laryngologist will have a team of people they work with in their office. So, they'll have a speech language pathologist that'll work along with their team that will help to offer some therapies, mostly speech therapy, speech language pathologist, right? So, they're there to help rehabilitate the speaking voice. But this is where we have a little deficiency right? So they're trained, most of them, to handle the speech level, not necessarily how to

handle a singer, okay? So we want to know exactly who to send them to that will know more about, not just a speech rehabilitation, but rehabilitation of the singing voice, and so once they have gone through what they need to go through in the speech rehabilitation, we as singing teachers need to know how to bring them back into the singing studio and continue that habilitation, right? Getting better. Not coming back from injury to where they were, which is a rehabilitation, but coming from that, 'I'm better' place to, let's continue the progress of advancement. So that's what a singing voice specialist is, someone who can care for the injured voice, after they have been rehabilitated in the medical side of things, and they have, are able to transition back to the musical side of things, was a very long answer to your very short question.

Dr. Allen

It was an excellent answer!

Dr. Loar

It continues on from there, but ask your next question!

Dr. Gay

Oh, I'm sure. I'm sure it's a fascinating thing, and as you were talking, I just kept having more and more questions come into mind here. For those of us who may not be so familiar with the anatomy of the vocal cords, would you mind just giving us just a little bit of a description of the vocal cords and how they work?

Dr. Loar

Sure, sure. We don't often think about what's inside and what it looks like. Right? And we get a lot of sound out of something that's very small. So, if you're listening to this, and you're thinking, 'gee, where are my vocal cords' if you'll take your hand and you'll just put them carefully on the front of your neck and you'll just say 'umm hmmm' just right here at the front of your neck, and you say 'umm hmmm' you can feel that little buzz right there in the front of your neck, right? That's where your vocal folds are coming together. So we call them not necessarily cords, we call them vocal folds, because that's what the anatomy looks like, they actually look like wedges. And so when we take a breath, air comes in, and it's pressurized. So, underneath those vocal folds, when they come together, there's a certain amount of pressure that automatically brings them together. The Bernoulli effect, so they're sucked together, and we make sound, okay, so we are, as we're learning how to sing, we're learning how to balance just enough air under just enough sound, so it's that balance of breath to vocalization that we really study in the singing studio.

And that's a very watered down description, but it helps you understand what's going on. So, when you actually look at your larynx, several years ago, I was able to go to Shenandoah University has a CCM Institute in the summer for singing teachers to go and learn, many things, pedagogy mainly, pedagogy, song style, things like that. But there's also one section that was anatomy and physiology, where we were able to spend four days in a cadaver lab, and that was life changing. So we were able to look at and hold larynges, yes. And so looking at really how small that is compared to the level and decibel of sound that we make, it's incredible. So if you look at the end of your thumb, your vocal folds can sit right on the end of your thumb, that's how small they are. Right. Crazy isn't it? But we can get some loud sounds out of those things.

Dr. Gay

We sure can and I always think about the lungs being involved too? If we have bigger lungs, can we make a louder sound?

Dr. Loar

You know, it depends on your anatomy, and it also depends on whether you're a guy or girl. Men have a tendency to have larger vocal folds than women, because we have smaller structures in general, this is a major generalization. Yes. Lung capacity absolutely is a key, and Joanna as a wind player, you know, that the more we study, the more we get more air capacity underneath us, and that's part of working on the singing voice, is really understanding what the breath mechanism can do.

Strengthening that, strengthening your breath. So we were talking early on in the podcast about being an amateur singer, and one of the wonderful things you can do for yourself is just to learn how to breathe deeper. That will instantly help the speaking and the singing voice to be healthier, helps us to be calmer, which is a tool that I need personally. And it also helps us, you know, calm down in our speaking voice, and get some depth to our body as a singer.

Dr. Hersey

So, Becky, we've been talking about the breath and the importance of that for studying voice, but we all know that we should be doing more relaxed breathing, in forms of meditation and things like that throughout the stress of the day. Can you give us a couple of tips for things that you do with the students that might help the rest of us too?

Dr. Loar

So let's do it together. Everybody sit in your chair wherever you are, and I want you to think about breathing, but you're going to feel that breath go down into the chair. [breathing in...]

And let it out this time, when you breathe, try to get a little bit deeper, go down into the chair.

[breathing in...]

So, it's that second, after we (breathe normally as I'm talking) it's that second, after we take the breath in that we don't know what to do. And that's the moment where our body just needs to suspend and enjoy it for a second [breathing in...]

And it's in that suspension that we actually live in the optimal point of where we can sing well. So, as we're learning how to suspend that breath, that's where the vocal cords are actually together, but we're not making sound. [breathing in...]

They're together, they're waiting for us to make a sound. Then we can release [breathing out...]

Hope that's helpful.

Dr. Hersey

That was wonderful, thank you so much! So Becky, you're in the singing studio, and some of our listeners might not realize that our music majors at UNCP get a full hour one on one with you in the vocal studio every week. And so can you share some of what you're doing now, obviously is what you do with them as well, what are some of the problems that you see when you're working with our students, and how do we overcome them?

Dr. Loar

I do get a chance to see them once a week for an hour. We have a wonderful department at UNCP where we are really close-knit, and I get to see them in the halls more often than that. I get to see them in my studio, but I also get to see them in my ensembles. So, all the information that I'm giving them in the studio, I can translate into that education and that information I'm giving them in the classroom as well. So there's a whole lot of cross-pollination, for lack of a better term, so they're getting reinforcement as to how to use that outside of the studio in their other classes and in ensembles and things like that.

I think a general issue, and it's not just for us, it's for all college kids, it's for all who are studying, is just the ability to balance school life, life in general, and how to be able to separate some of that when we come into the studio. You know, as musicians, this is a personal experience, right? So we have to be able to be vulnerable. We have to be able to be open and clearly communicate with our instructors, and ourselves, to be honest, that, you know, 'am I on the top of my game today? No, maybe not, but I'm going to try and set that aside, I'm going to take whatever I can from today, and make today's lesson count, and then I'm going to prepare for the next lesson and do it all again.'

And that's really, it's not about getting that golden nugget in that one lesson that is going to make us a professional. That's not what we do. It is the journey of education of learning. 'Did I do it better this time? Was it better this week than last week? Am I learning to be a better singer? Am I learning to be a better human, am I learning to balance life stuff, and music stuff?' Because once they finish college, we all know, those college struggles may go away, but they'll change. They'll become life struggles, not necessarily struggles, maybe just pulls, right? Things that pull us in one direction. So, I really try to not just teach them about singing, that's my job I teach them about singing, but how to approach, you know, being a good musician, being a good academic, giving your all, and being okay with what you get back, and knowing when it's good, and when you might need to work on it a little bit more.

Dr. Gay

And those are skills that would apply to any major.

Dr. Loar

Everybody!

Dr. Gay

And even our jobs, you know, it's really good advice.

Chancellor Cummings

This is Chancellor Cummings and I want to thank you for listening to *30 Brave Minutes*. Our faculty and students provide expertise, energy and passion, driving our region forward. Our commitment to Southeastern North Carolina has never been stronger through our teaching, our research and our community outreach. I want to encourage you to consider making a tax-deductible contribution to the College of Arts and Sciences at the University of North Carolina at Pembroke, with your help, we will continue our impact for generations to come. You can donate online at uncp.edu/give. Thanks again for listening, now back to more *30 Brave Minutes*.

Dr. Hersey

Becky, can you talk to us about what role posture plays for the singer?

Dr. Loar

Posture plays a huge role, and just this week, watching posture, sort of reassignment, really bring on a light bulb. So posture, meaning, you know, we think stand up straight, right? My mommy told me to stand up straight. Yes, that is it, but really learning what's moving? Where? Why? Right? So as I'm standing up straight I'm releasing tension around my larynx. So, in my office, I have two really big, colorful diagrams of the larynx and the breathing mechanism and every day I'm pointing at them, 'this is what you're moving. This is what this is doing,' right? Because it's, we're working with things we can't get in there and touch and reassign or readjust. We're having to know where it's at, and why we need to readjust it.

So our whole body is made up of muscles that go from one point to another point with a specific task. And that task is pivotal to whether we're standing up straight, or whether we're kind of slouching forward, and what that does to the muscles around the larynx, and the muscles and the breathing mechanism. So, yes, posture's key, and it's tricky too. You know, our kids walk around with so many backpacks and bags and things like that. So, trying to educate them on that too.

Dr. Allen

So Becky tell me a little bit about the career opportunities that are available to some of your students once they graduate, what do they end up doing?

Dr. Loar

So, a degree in voice, it will give you a lot of tools to go many directions. The obvious directions are continuing performance, and that can look like many different things. So we have lots of different genres, we have classical music, we have music education, which is a large branch of our UNCP Department here, is the music education program. So, they'll go into the classroom. Or musical theatre, we have many different community organizations in the Fayetteville and surrounding Lumberton areas, which keep our singers very busy, and give them lots of opportunities along with the opportunities they have here on campus.

Our degree is a wonderful one, and readies them for the task of, 'okay, I'm going to take a national audition. I'm ready.' So, it gets them ready for a performance degree, music education, music industry. So our industry degree is a fantastic one which helps them to learn how to be a performer industry, but also to sit in the booth to be a recording engineer, what that looks like, what the tasks are, what the current software is, et cetera. So there's lots of different ways that our students can go with their music degree, specifically voice.

Dr. Allen

So, when you were doing your doctoral research, what drew you to this topic of singing vocal specialization? Like, why is it that you chose that? Or what was the official dissertation topic? Do you remember offhand?

Dr. Loar

So, my dissertation topic was, and is, because right? Our research never dies. It is "Singing Voice Specialization, an Essential Bridge Between Two Worlds." And I've always been interested in this topic. But I'll be quite honest with you, I knew that it was going to take a lot of research, and I tried to go another direction, which I thought was going to be easier. And I instantly hit a dead end. And I thought, okay. All signs are leading me to where I need to be, which was really my heart's desire anyway. And so this research is important research. It is absolutely a current topic among voice teachers. It's really relatively, when we're talking about medical stuff, it's new, but when I say new, we're talking 35 years ago, this was proposed, that we should have degrees that are medical arts, and so, with that proposition, that came from Dr. Robert Sataloff out of Philadelphia. He is a wonderful singer, but he also went on to become a laryngologist, and so he lives in both of those worlds, and he wrote an article which, funny enough at the same time. Dr. Ingo Titze, wrote a similar article, addressing same issues of, we need a degree that helps progress this idea of medical arts coming together.

So, voice is just one area of that. We also have dance. So, how many injuries do you know from a dancer who has suffered an ankle injury? There's a lot of cross-pollination there too. Horn players, injuries of hand, pianists, hand injury, et cetera. Yeah so we have a lot of this, this isn't just in the voice community. But that is specifically what drew my attention, as I started this research, I realized that we just haven't come far enough to bridge that gap and so more ways to spotlight that we have a missing link here, we'll continue the conversation, continue us looking at ways to bridge this gap over to the medical community. The musical community is not one that is highly certified, whereas the medical community, is. They have certifications in every area and so we need to continue to find ways to bridge that gap.

Dr. Allen

Have you had any students who were interested in bridging that gap in terms of their future careers?

Dr. Loar

Yes, and honestly too, you mentioned why I was interested in this research, but I guess one of the main reasons is because I've had so many singers come through my studio who didn't know they were up against some injury, and when I referred them out, they were always thankful that I had, and because of this research and doing clinical observations, and time set aside in clinic with laryngologists and understanding how they are addressing these things in the medical community, and how we can help this on our end, it helped me be able to serve my singers better. So number one, to be able to identify what's happening in the studio. My ears perk up. I hear something. So I know it's outside of my jurisdiction, I refer out. I have to know as a singing teacher, who, in my community can best serve my singers.

We are very fortunate at UNCP that we are very close to Duke Voice Center, where one of the leading singing voice specialists is, and she's fantastic and a leading speaker and author on this topic, Leda Scarce, and she is wonderful, and I've been able to send some singers to her, but as a singing teacher, like I said, I need to know what's happening, where to send them, and what to do when they return to my studio. So, what questions to ask, so that I know how best to serve them and how, and to know that they're being served well, by the practice that they're going to. I'm very fortunate to have been able to reach out to Duke Voice Center, and have been granted the opportunity to come and do a clinical observation internship with their practice in the spring, so we are currently setting up that

schedule, but I'm thrilled to be able to spend some time with their clinicians and shadow them caring for singers in the medical environment in a clinical setting, and ask those big questions that will continue the research moving forward.

Dr. Hersey

That's wonderful, and in this journey that you're taking our students on, from a high school student, who likes to sing, through to being a professional vocalist at the end when they graduate, you are also out performing as a professional vocalist also. Would you like to share some of your favorite experiences as a performer that you've had?

Dr. Loar

Well, I'm thrilled to be able to just get back to it. I hate to talk about Covid again, but we had a big pause, and so we're thrilled all of us singers, to be able to be out and performing again. I'm always thrilled to collaborate with my other faculty members, and so I will be doing a faculty recital in January with my colleague Jaeyoon Kim and our accompanist Seung-Ah Kim, and so we will be doing an evening of German songs in January.

I am also in a couple of days here, going to do a choral workshop in Tennessee, and to be able to also do a concert there for their worship services on Sunday, but also to be able to work with their choir, discussing a lot of the vocal ideas and techniques that we've talked about today, to be able to maintain that vocal health within a more community environment. And I also sing with a professional choir in Colombia, which is mainly a group of professional singers that are made up of teachers from the midlands, and we all come together, we're called Limited Time Only, we're a chamber choir, and we're called Limited Time Only because that's what we have. So, we meet about once every two weeks, and it's wonderful to sing with those other educators.

Dr. Allen

That's wonderful. I wish I had lived closer to Columbia, I'd come.

Dr. Hersey

Becky, share with us some of the success stories of some of your students who've left Pembroke to go on into their careers.

Dr. Loar

Well, I love to see where the students go after they leave the studio, right? After they leave it and they have the education that we've given them, it's always wonderful to see where they go and what they do with that. And so one of our singers is already out there, had landed a job and had signed her contract before she had graduated, and she already is in the classroom, and has successfully started a music program at a school that did not have one. So she has resurrected a music program with a wonderful administration in a school in Fayetteville. So I'm very thrilled for her success.

Dr. Hersey

That's so wonderful.

Dr. Loar

I also am thrilled to have a studio full of singers that are very connected to the community, one singer has already sent me several emails this semester, letting me know that he has contracts on major, at major times of the year so that I'll be able to work with him on his classwork. So our singers are out there working, they're in the community, they're using their skills, and we're thrilled.

Dr. Hersey

That's so great. And we look forward to catching up with you again in the future to find out the students that you're teaching now, and what they're going to go off and do. We're so grateful that you joined us today and we thank you for your time talking about vocal health. I think we'll all think about our voices a little bit more today, and we'll all remember to do that beautiful deep breathing, and our water, and our sleep, I think those were the notes I have. So, Becky, thank you so much for being with us today.

Dr. Loar

Thank you for having me.

Credits

This podcast was edited and transcribed by Joanna Hersey, and our theme music was composed by Reilly Morton.

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