

Spaulding Family



The Spaulding name came to this area in 1974. Hired by the Frankenmuth School District to teach English and Speech and to direct musicals, Keith Spaulding was to become well-known for originating and directing the performing arts class Venner. Born in Saginaw, November 23, 1951, to John and Gwen Spaulding, he attended Stone Elementary, North Intermediate, and Arthur Hill High School in Saginaw. Baptized and confirmed at First Congregational Church, he was involved in bands, choirs, and musical productions at both church and school. An honors graduate from Western Michigan University in 1973, Spaulding was first hired by Carrollton Public Schools and became choir director at Jefferson Avenue United Methodist Church.

In 1975, Keith moved to the Frankenmuth School District and directed five book musicals. In the summer of 1978, the Frankenmuth Bavarian Inn hired Spaulding to direct and perform in *The Fantasticks* at Fischer Hall. In 1979, he originated a volunteer choir – Venner Dusin (a dozen friends) – to perform around the area during the Christmas season. Encouraged by the success of that group, Superintendent Jerry McEwen orchestrated the beginning of a Performing Arts class at the high school, with Spaulding teaching the vocal music sessions, and choreographer/teacher Kim Wininger instructing the dance/movement sessions. In a nod to his heritage, Spaulding named this Performing Arts class “Venner”, a Norwegian word meaning “friends”. Venner and show-choir subdivision Venner Sirkel grew in size and popularity. Christmas shows grew so large that the celebration had to be moved into Saginaw’s Temple Theatre, and then to Saginaw’s Heritage Theatre.

In 1984, Spaulding married Susan Wendland from Saginaw, and the Venner organization became a family affair, with Spaulding directing, his sister Elizabeth serving as costumer, historian, and

photographer, and wife Sue becoming the business manager. Spaulding ended his directing position at the JAUMC in Saginaw, and began directing the choir at Frankenmuth United Methodist Church. Kelsey Lauren, born to the Spauldings in 1986, and sister Emily Anne, born in 1989, added to the Spaulding legacy in Venner, as each girl became a member of both Venner and Venner Sirkel.

Construction of the Bronner Performing Arts Center brought Venner performances back to Frankenmuth. Keith and Sue’s dear friends, Wally and Irene Bronner, credited Venner with helping to inspire their donation of one million dollars toward the new performing arts facility. The Bronners also purchased a grand piano for Venner to use at the Center. Venner and Sirkel traveled extensively, with performance tours of Europe and Gunzenhausen, Germany, and Walt Disney World in Orlando, Florida. A girls’ barbershop quartet, that Spaulding originated, won a local competition and was sent by a local Sweet Adelines group on an all-expense-paid trip to compete internationally in San Antonio, Texas. The Spaulding family yearly wrote a Christmas carol to be used as their seasonal card. In 2008, the Spauldings were guest performers with the Saginaw Choral Society for their Christmas show at the Temple Theatre. “Forever Star”, their carol for that Christmas, was dedicated to Wally Bronner, who had passed away earlier that year.

The Frankenmuth Rotary Club recognized Spaulding in 1989 by making him a Paul Harris Fellow. Other awards include: Aims Award by the Saginaw Kiwanis Club, 1994; Crystal Apple Award by *The Saginaw News*, 1997; and Honor Alumnus for Arthur Hill High School, 2007. In 2005, Venner was awarded the All-Area Arts Award. At a Venner reunion at Saginaw’s Temple Theatre in 2008, he received a tribute from Michigan’s Governor Jennifer Granholm recognizing his contributions to the community.



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