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By Joan Giangrassie Kates, Special to the Tribune

Lucille R. Halfvarson, 1919-2010 **Longtime music teacher staged 'Messiah' in Aurora**

For years, music teacher and local church choir director Lucille R. Halfvarson taught private voice lessons in her living room.

Then she took her act to a bigger stage.

"It was a sheer love of music that inspired her to share it with as many people as possible," said her daughter, Linnea.

The former longtime Aurora resident served as a music instructor and director of choral groups for 25 years at Waubensee Community College in Sugar Grove, beginning in 1967, when the school opened. There she established the Waubensee District Chorus, which staged an annual performance of Handel's "Messiah" at the Paramount Arts Centre in Aurora until 1992.

"It was a very popular do-it-yourself 'Messiah' that brought together the talents of hundreds of people — singers, musicians, technicians — with Lucille as the driving force behind it," said former colleague Gibby Monokoski, a professor of music at Waubensee who for many years played trumpet in "Messiah." "It was a huge undertaking, and she basically ran it herself."

Mrs. Halfvarson, 91, the 1976 Aurora YMCA Woman of the Year and a 2001 inductee into the Fox Valley Arts Hall of Fame, died Monday, Nov. 8, of a massive stroke at Golden Meadows Nursing Home in Hayward, Wis., where she had lived for the past three years.

In 2000, both Mrs. Halfvarson and her late husband, Sten, the choral director at West High School in Aurora from 1938 to 1979, were awarded honorary doctoral degrees from Aurora University for their contributions as educators in the arts. He died in 2003.

"The same qualities that made her such a good teacher carried over into her parenting as well," her daughter said. "Because of her, I've had a lifelong appreciation for the arts."

Mrs. Halfvarson instilled a love of music in all her four children. Her son, Eric, is an accomplished bass opera singer and has performed in opera houses around the world.

"I remember riding my tricycle around in circles on our driveway and listening to my mother's voice through an open kitchen window," he recalled. "She'd sing large portions of the soprano aria 'Rejoice Greatly' from the 'Messiah' while washing the dishes."

Born Lucille Robertson in Petersburg, Ill., Mrs. Halfvarson grew up in Galva. Her mother had a rich contralto voice and encouraged her daughter to develop her own talents and study music.

A 1941 graduate of Knox College in Galesburg, Mrs. Halfvarson taught music at Freeman Elementary School in Aurora and later at a high school in Galesburg, before returning with her husband to Aurora to raise a family.

During the 1950s and '60s, Mrs. Halfvarson directed local church choirs. She also became a voice student of Theodore Harrison of the American Conservatory of Music in Chicago, where she earned a master's degree in music in 1969.

From 1982 to 1993, Mrs. Halfvarson and her husband commuted to downtown Chicago to teach in the Merit Music Program, aimed at providing musical instruction to underprivileged children.

"They were passionate people, and not just when it came to their music," her daughter said. "Every year they'd spend a week in Door County, Wis. — just the two of them. They'd come back looking like a couple of newlyweds."

Mrs. Halfvarson was also a former co-chair of the citizens advisory committee for the Paramount Arts Center and the founder of the United Arts Board Fox Valley.

Other survivors include two daughters, Laura Jump and Mary Covelli; seven grandchildren; and a great-grandchild.

Visitation will be held from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. Friday at New England Congregational Church, 406 W. Galena Blvd. Aurora. A memorial service will be held at 2 p.m. Saturday at New England Congregational Church.