

Mason Serna

Mr. Greco

English III

7 April 2023

## **Every Voice Counts - the Interview with Jill Denny**

It is a bright early morning on a chill Wednesday, Jill Denny is making a cup of coffee in her classroom. She's been the Mountain View Choir Director for twenty-eight years. She takes a sip of coffee and goes over the lesson plan with the assistant teacher, Michael Farnsley. They work together to make sure all students are well-equipped. At 8:45 am, with all the students finishing their vocal warm-ups with Michael, she greets the class with an enthusiastic attitude and begins the class. She's been up since 5:30, yet she never fails to bring a contagious energy that keeps everybody engaged.

In every school, there are always teachers who never fail to inspire their students to push themselves to their fullest extent. Jill Denny, the high school choir director at Mountain View High School, could be considered one of those teachers. She goes beyond as an instructor, going out of her way to show compassion to her students. I had the privilege of learning more about Jill's career and overall philosophy. From tidbits of her personal life to her hopes for what she wants to give to her students, she's a teacher who goes about her way through the curriculum

they teaches and in a way that inspires students. She is a one-of-a-kind teacher with a family business background in music.

Jill grew up in a musical family, with her father having a PhD in music composition and a high school band director, and her mother having multiple master's degrees in music education and musical performance, having numerous teaching positions, such as a high school choir director at her local school. Family influence was a key factor in shaping who she is today, as she started studying music from “*day one*,” according to Jill. The influence of music can shape a child in terms of brain development. Greater brain activation in the prefrontal cortex during tasks involving improved executive functions, meaning a greater ability to plan and organize. Not only did music in Jill’s life nurture her love for it, but it also supports why she is so well-equipped to be a musician and a leader.

Her upbringing helps the teacher she is today. Music can be used to build something larger, reflecting on her . One of Jill’s core principles in her approach to being a choir teacher is her commitment to creating a true sense of belonging among her students. She goes beyond simply including everybody in the class: she wants every student to feel like they are seen and valued. “*I hope that I am daily working on making everyone feel that they belong, not just that they're included. I think the word inclusion comes with a sort of power, like I could choose to include you or not. But when it really is working is when you say, I belong here.*” Her distinction reveals her goal to empower students rather than what’s best for the choir. Her philosophy helps build a strong community; she not only encourages students that their voice matters musically, but also personally. “*We're only successful if everyone is successful,*” she adds, showing how she intentionally fosters a community where collaboration and mutual respect are more important to success than individual perfection. Music is used as a tool to create unity in her classroom.

To Jill, her greatest accomplishments aren't awards and accolades, although she has certainly received many over the years. Her greatest accomplishments are her students, especially the ones who come back to share how their experiences from her choir class shaped them as individuals. *"The biggest reward for me,"* she says, *"is when students come back later and they say, 'Wow, this meant something to me,'"* She doesn't measure her success through trophies; rather, she does through her former students returning to her classroom and sharing how her impact shaped them as individuals. That impact is what drives her. *"This is how it impacted me as a citizen."* They tell her, showing how her work is shaping students into being more than just a musician.

Despite the long hours and energy to run an elective like this, Jill doesn't seem to find the job a burden. *"First of all, I have the best job in the entire world, so it doesn't feel hard to me,"* she told me. She sees what other teachers may view as challenging, such as lesson planning, teaching the lessons, and preparing for concerts and tours, as meaningful to her job. *"Even if you do the same song with different kids, it's going to be a different experience,"* she explains, demonstrating that her goal in teaching is not to perfect a product, but to find personal creative fulfillment in guiding students through their musical journeys.

Even her vision for the future of the Choir elective after she retires reflects this mindset. *"I hope that it remains a process-oriented program where we're focusing on the kids in front of us,"* she told me. Her biggest fear with this program is that it could lose its true meaning, shifting towards valuing competitions and products over student development. *"I think that we do win competitions and awards because we pay attention to the students along the way, and this great thing comes out of that."* In other words, success stems from a product of care, not the product itself. The future of the choir program remains uncertain for now, but with the culture Jill has

built currently, it is clear that this program beats to the rhythm of joy, compassion, collaboration, and purpose.

I've been in Jill Denny's choir for the better part of my Junior year. I may not have had her as my choir teacher as long as others may have, but after our conversation, it became clear to me that she is not just a choir teacher; she's a mentor, role model, and positive influence on our community. She uses music as a path, guiding students into a better understanding of themselves and the community around them. After all, her main hope is for her students to be the best versions of themselves. Everything she does, every warm-up and every concert, is part of that larger picture. In a school system that can often feel like results are the top priority, she reminds us that growth and belonging are just as important. In the end, that's the most important lesson a teacher could give.

Teachers like Jill Denny are one-of-a-kind, but they shouldn't be. Her story is a reminder that education is most meaningful when it nurtures the heart as much as the mind. As schools and communities, we should support and celebrate educators who go above and beyond the curriculum, those who shape students into loving and compassionate individuals. Because in doing so, not only can they turn students into great learners, but also into great human beings.

#### **Works Cited:**

*"Brain and Music Program." Brain and music program. Brain and Creativity Institute. (2023, March 30). <https://dornsife.usc.edu/bci/brain-and-music-program/>*

*Denny, Jill. Personal Interview. 5 March, 2025.*

*Denny, Jill. Personal Interview. 28 April, 2025.*

### **Use of AI:**

Used for the outline: sentence structure and ideas for different sources. Also used for grammatical check. Used it to help with sentence starting and brainstorming. Grammarly.