

2022 GMTA TEACHER OF THE YEAR

Debra Dickensheets



Debra Ramsey Dickensheets is a native of the South Carolina lowcountry. Growing up in Beaufort, she was exposed to many styles of music at an early age. Earliest memories are of having a piano in the house and picking out little tunes on it as a preschool child. Parents made sure she had the requested piano lessons and choir training as soon as the teachers would accept her, which meant at that time around the second grade. The Ramsey family was very involved with the Baptist Church of Beaufort. The beautiful historic sanctuary that survived the Civil War had traditional classical music at Sunday morning services and gospel and contemporary music at the evening service. She had private piano lessons, and later in junior high school organ lessons as well, with the same teacher from the beginning through high school. The Minister of Music at the church gave her private voice lessons her senior year and she sang Dvorak song, *God is my Shepherd*, at her high school graduation from Beaufort Academy. Her senior recital was on the Steinway concert D piano at the school as well. Church music, along with diverse styles

brought in by the military, Gullah, Jewish, and classical music presented locally by the South Carolina Arts Commission were all early influences.

A professional career as a musician began for Debra at the age of 15 when she was hired by the US Marine Corps to be the organist and choir director for 3rd Recruit Training Battalion at the Protestant Chapel on Parris Island, SC. Groups of 1000 soldiers came in waves, 6 weeks at a time, for boot camp. On special occasions she would play the organ with the Marine Corps Brass Band.

Deb graduated with an associate degree in music with honors from North Greenville College. There she was chapel organist and sang in the scholarship ensemble and well as the touring choir. Debra's piano teaching career began as an undergraduate student at Converse College, where she earned a BM in organ performance. As a student she took piano pedagogy classes and taught in the precollege division of the music department. She has been teaching keyboards ever since. Organ pedagogy classes at Florida State University followed where she earned a master's degree in organ performance. After graduation she worked briefly at Fox House of Music in Charleston, South Carolina as a piano and organ teacher before accepting a position as Director of Music and Organist at First Presbyterian Church of Hilton Head Island. There she built a private piano and organ teaching studio while training many choristers and handbell ringers of all ages in a full time position at the church.

After marriage to her physician husband David Dickensheets, MD, and moving to Rhode Island for him to continue his medical training at Brown University, she continued her education at the New England Conservatory simultaneously teaching in her private studio. She studied organ with Yuko Hayashi and improvisation with Bill Porter. At that time she also worked in Providence at Gloria Dei Lutheran Church, Grace Episcopal Church, Temple Emanuel (conservative Jewish congregation) and at Rhode Island College, directing choirs, solo playing and accompanying on the piano and organ.

In 1988 Debra and her husband moved to Gainesville, Florida where she continued her career as a teacher, accompanist and church musician. During this time she founded and was harpsichordist for the Alachua Consort, a chamber ensemble specializing in the music of the Baroque along with violinist, Annemieke Pronker-Coron and oboist, John Netardus. Deb accompanied the Willis Bodine Chorale with Orchestra on one of their Florida Tours with brass ensemble and as organist with orchestra on other concerts. Deb also served as dean

of the Gainesville Chapter of the American Guild of Organists and on the board of directors for the Gainesville Symphony Orchestra.

Relocating to Alpharetta in 1998, Debra started her current studio in Kimball Farms and joined North Fulton Music Teacher's Association. She has served as interim musician at Roswell Presbyterian Church, Johns Creek UMC, First Church of Christ Scientist of Atlanta, and Saint Brigid Catholic Church. She was a piano accompanist for 7 years for Grammy winning Gwinnett Young Singers while daughter, Caroline was a singer. Caroline also earned the Paderewski Gold medal from Piano Guild while studying piano with her mother.

Debra was North Fulton Music Teachers Association's president from 2019-2022. Under her leadership, with the assistance of her very active board members and committees, NFMTA was awarded "Chapter of the Year" at the 2021 State Conference at Piedmont University.

NFMTA maintained a membership of over 80 teachers during the Covid-19 pandemic and Deb hosted monthly Zoom meetings when meeting in person was not possible. Thinking outside the box, one meeting was even held outdoors. Fall Festival, Celebrate with Music and Local Audition events continued during her presidency, overcoming the challenges of Covid-19.

Since 2014, Debra has been the director of music/organist at Lutheran Church of the Ascension in Atlanta. There she oversees a fine chamber music program. Her composition "Jubilate" for 9 handbells, written during the pandemic for socially distanced ringers, won an award in a MuseScore competition.

Debra's private teaching studio currently has approximately 20 students mostly of piano, but also of organ, harpsichord and digital keyboards. She received *Top Music Teacher Award* in 2020 and 2021 from Steinway Piano Galleries of Atlanta. She is the chairman of Alpharetta/Steinway Center for Piano Guild for which she is a member of the Hall of Fame and adjudicator. She is also co chairman of the Ocee chapter of the National Federation of Music Clubs.

Georgia Music Teachers Association appointed Debra as Wellness Chairman for the state in 2019. Thinking was at that time she would be dealing with issues such as carpal tunnel and repetitive motion syndrome, things changed when Covid-19 entered the picture. Wellness transformed into a bigger role. Fortunately, her husband, David, Medical Epidemiologist for Northside Hospital, was able to contribute to the GMTA newsletters with good medical advice. In 2021 Deb was unexpectedly diagnosed with invasive carcinoma of the breast. She managed to receive treatment in between her studio spring recital and the beginning of the school year in August. She is now a cancer survivor and a strong advocate for early cancer screening.

Most recent concerts post pandemic include music on the historic house pipe organ in the Renaissance Room at Viscaya Museum in Miami. In 2022 Debra played on the L'Organo series at Piccolo Spoleto in Charleston and for the Lowcountry AGO on Hilton Head Island. She makes an effort to include music by women composers and regularly collaborates with other musicians to compose and produce new music.

Website - www.alpharettapianos.com

You Tube Channel - <https://youtube.com/channel/UCJ7f7-AcIW8>

Linkedin profile - [linkedin.com/in/debra-dickensheets-88a18628](https://www.linkedin.com/in/debra-dickensheets-88a18628)

It has been my pleasure to teach music for many years, nearly 24 of which have been in the state of Georgia. Teaching in my own diverse studio of many ages, levels, cultures and interests has been eye opening. Music truly is a universal language and I look forward to many more years sharing with others.

Teaching Tips from Debra Ramsey Dickensheets 2022

1. Take care of your Health.

In March of 2021, to my surprise, I was diagnosed with invasive carcinoma, a type of breast cancer. Dutifully, I went masked during the covid-19 pandemic to get routine screening thinking there would not be a problem as with all my previous mammograms. But this time was different. The radiologist said there was an abnormality that needed to be biopsied and subsequently needed surgery and radiation treatments. Fortunately I was able to schedule surgery the week after my studio's spring recital. Treatment continued over the summer and I was ready to be back teaching in August soon as school started as a grateful cancer survivor. I attribute my comparatively easy treatment routine to early detection. We all know colleagues who have gone undetected for longer periods of time and had a much worse experience. Regular routine screening is the key to minimizing the effects and treatment of many types of cancer. Please get your cancer screening.

Other preventative health care, especially appropriate vaccines, at minimum, help keep you out of bed and working in your studio, and at best could save your life. A healthy teacher is a better teacher. Visit your primary care physician at least once a year and follow his/her advice for cancer screening and vaccinations.

Recommendations can change over time.

2. Take Care of your student's HEALTH.

I have a sign at my front door that says "Wash hands. Many fingers use these keys." Every student uses sanitizer before putting their hands on the keyboard. We use masks as recommended by the CDC, keeping in mind individual risk of infecting, and social distancing. Parents know there is an option for Zoom lesson at their regular time or make up lesson later on and use it if their child has a fever or other symptoms of illness out of respect for me and the other students.

3. Set Goals at the Beginning of each Year.

Your student will have individual needs to be addressed. That is one of the beauties of private lessons. These can change year to year, sometimes even mid year with cultural changes and school work demands. Be flexible. The pupil might want to learn a particular piece or style of music. Set realistic practice goals. I often find that accomplishments lesson to lesson, and efficient practice habits are more important than minutes/hours practiced each week. Plan short term, midterm, and long term projects for your students. Not every student wants to be a concert pianist and your goals may not be their goals or their parent's goals. Keep a dialogue going.

4. Positive Reinforcement goes a long way.

When my husband and I moved to a home on acreage in rural north central Florida we decided it was time to get a Labrador Retriever puppy. We joined a dog class with a very good trainer who recommended the book "Don't shoot the Dog" by Karen Pryor. It is all about changing behavior through positive reinforcement. It not only works for dogs, but for athletes and musicians. This book was a game changer for my teaching.

5. Meet the student where they are.

Not all musical backgrounds are the same. No matter what age, some know more, and some are more receptive than others. It is our duty as a teacher to find out where each student is in their musical journey and help them along the way, sometimes filling gaps.

6. Keep up to date on new technology.

Use of the internet, and apps can be very helpful teaching aids. Almost daily since the pandemic, I use Zoom, ForScore, and MuseScore. www.coursera.org is a good solution for training at a reasonable price. There are some especially good music technology classes through Berkeley for Protools, electronic music, and general technology.

7. Sing with your students.

Whether or not you are a vocal trainer, it is good to demonstrate musical line and phrasing through singing. It is one reason new Music Director of the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra, Nathalie Stutzmann, is successful.

8. Break it down.

When tackling a difficult piece of music, break it down into small pieces and then string them together. Routinely practicing start to finish, as many students tend to do, can be overwhelming and counterproductive.

9. Take ADVERSITY and make a good thing out of it.

During the height of the Covid-19 pandemic my students were not allowed to attend lessons in person at my studio. Zoom lessons over the internet that I had never even considered doing prior, became a lifeline for my studio and are now a regular part of the week. For various reasons, mostly distance and transportation it is a good option for some students.

Our regular concert hall venues became unavailable during Covid-19. I started informal "Front Porch" recitals in our yard as an alternative way for students to share music. Families and friends bring lawn chairs and blankets to sit on for a relaxed afternoon of music played from the studio Cassio digital piano and Nord Keyboard set up on the porch. This recital has become so popular we still have a "First Saturday in Fall" recital on the front porch.