BSC alumna returns to her roots to head advancement for the college

BY LINDA HALLMARK

Talk about a family affair. First her parents, Don Patrick ’57 and Margaret Hines Patrick ’56, sang with the Birmingham-Southern College Concert Choir. She followed in their footsteps, as did her brother, Bentley Patrick ’89. Even her brother’s wife, Melissa Self Patrick ’87, was president of the choir.

Adelia Patrick Thompson says it was one of the highlights of her life. Not only did her entire family sing with the choir, but they each had the pleasure of singing under the direction of longtime and revered Birmingham-Southern conductor Hugh Thomas. For Thompson, a 1986 BSC alumna who came to Birmingham-Southern on a voice scholarship, that was a real reward.

Thompson, a native of Mountain Brook, began studying music at a young age. She studied voice and piano at BSC while in elementary school, she says. Although her love of music grew stronger as she grew up, she ended up majoring in English at Birmingham-Southern.

“One of the things I treasured about my education here is that you have the chance to educate your whole self,” says Thompson.

It has served her well. She had a successful career in development and marketing with organizations including the Alabama Humanities Foundation, Alabama Symphony Orchestra, and Central Bank of the South. Later, she was named assistant vice president for development at Agnes Scott College in Decatur, Ga., after working with the college as director of major gifts and development associate.

Most recently, she was vice president for development for the National Foundation for Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta. Now she has come home to serve her alma mater after being named the new vice president for institutional advancement at Birmingham-Southern.

Besides maintaining a successful career, her talents have allowed her to enjoy success on the stage as well. After performing with several community theatres, she was invited to audition for the Atlanta Lyric Theatre, where she appeared in many lead roles.

But her performances with the Atlanta company almost never happened. Her singing success was disrupted and nearly cut short when she was struck by a disease that temporarily took her voice. The diagnosis was severe esophageal reflux, which caused granulomas to form on her vocal cords.

It took two vocal cord surgeries in 1991 and 1992 in Philadelphia, followed by a third surgery to repair her stomach in 1993 in Birmingham at UAB, to allow her the opportunity to speak, much less sing again, she says. Recovery involved working with a speech pathologist and coaching with BSC Voice Professor David Smith. “It was a gift, and a soul-searching experience,” says Thompson, “and in the end, I got off easy. I got the lesson and a second chance.”

For Thompson, it’s about goals, and goals have to be tied to something real, like people, she says. Little did she know that her commitment to continue pursuit of a performance avocation would lead her to her soul mate. In 1997, she married J. Lynn Thompson, artistic director of the Atlanta Lyric Theatre.

With a satisfying job at the CDC Foundation and a husband with a 30-year career in Atlanta, Thompson says she never anticipated coming back to Birmingham. Calls come when they come, says Thompson. A devoted husband, close family here in Birmingham including nieces and godchildren, and the chance to help her college all contributed to her decision to come home.

“In my way of thinking, in my faith walk, a call will come, and you have to decide if it is an invitation to the next right thing, or just an interesting turn of events,” says Thompson. “I had to decide if I could really help my school.”

She says it is important to be a good steward of the legacy of the college and to do everything possible to put legs under the vision and direction being established by BSC President Dr. David Pollick. “I think Dr. Pollick is absolutely right about what can happen for BSC in this next chapter of its life,” says Thompson. “That’s why I came back.”

One such suggestion by Pollick was the renaming of the department from development to institutional advancement. Thompson says the title is more in keeping with the field and it provides a clearer statement of what the division does. She thinks it will be helpful in communicating with alumni and friends.

A new position with a new title and new goals are now in place for Thompson. She says she plans to build on the college’s excellence by caring for existing relationships and reconnecting with alumni across the country. “About 60 percent of our alumni are outside of Birmingham,” said Thompson, “and I’ve been one of them. I hope we can, through our work, make all alumni feel more connected.”

Carrying out her goals will entail working with admissions, finance, and basically all aspects of the college, says Thompson. Also, she needs to buy different shoes. “I had forgotten about the brick paths,” says Thompson.

It is a “pretty amazing job” to wake up to every day being able to reach out to fellow alumni and welcome them home, she says, and adds that it requires a lot of different welcome mats for different people.

“One of the most powerful things anyone can do is to provide financial support to something we believe in,” says Thompson. “I’m honored to be a part of BSC’s next chapter. It’s my turn to give.”