

20 questions for Sylvia McNair

Interview by Patrick O'Meara Photography by Steve Raymer

A Star Is Re-Born

After a 25-year career as an opera, musical theater, and cabaret star, Sylvia McNair returned to Bloomington to teach at IU, from whence she earned a master's degree. Hers was a stunning career for a small-town girl from Mansfield, Ohio. She spent four seasons with The Metropolitan Opera, sang in the great opera houses of Europe, won two Grammy awards, performed for Pope John Paul II, the U.S. Supreme Court, and Hillary Clinton. A cancer survivor, she has taken her battle with the disease public—raising awareness and inspiring others. While continuing to teach, McNair has resumed her career presenting solo concerts and performing in musical theater around the country. She recently sat down with Patrick O'Meara to answer 20 questions for *Bloom* readers.

BLOOM I thought we might talk a little bit about growing up. Were your parents musicians?

M McNAIR Growing up? Let's talk about growing up. Here's what I have to say about growing up. [singing] "Why, oh why, oh why, oh why. Why did I ever leave Ohio." No, I'm totally joking!

Yes, my parents were musicians. My father did not make his living as a musician but I've always said he was the real artistic soul of our household. My mother did make her living as a musician for 37 years as a schoolteacher. She taught music in the public schools, kindergarten through 6th grade. She did choral music mostly and she was a pianist as well. She put me on the piano bench when I was three years old and she started trying to teach me how to play the piano.



Sylvia in her new Bloomington home.

BSL
Business
Services, LLC

An Indiana Licensed
 Collection Agency



400 W 7th St, Ste 104 Bloomington
 www.ahmcp.com • 812.332.6556



Sylvia's musical education began at an early age. She is pictured here with her father.

The Bloomington Board of REALTORS®



Why use REALTORS®?

REALTORS® are licensed real estate practitioners who maintain memberships in a local association of REALTORS®, a state association of REALTORS®, and the National Association of REALTORS®. As members of these organizations, they are pledged to abide by a strict code of professional conduct. They also have access to a wide variety of business services that are not available to non-REALTORS®. This gives them a competitive edge in the marketplace, enabling them to provide superior services to buyers and sellers of real property.

Monroe & Owen County REALTORS®
 Serving South Central Indiana

(812) 339-1301

www.BloomingtonCommercialProperties.org

www.homefinder.org
 Homefinder.org magazine

My father, as I mentioned, did not make his living as a musician, but he was so sensitive and so in tune with the power of music. He could be moved to tears. He was an artistic soul. He actually was a conductor. He was the music director at the church I was in, and at one point there were something like seven different choirs in that church. He would often pay for orchestra musicians to come for special occasions at that church. He just was an amazing guy.

BLOOM You grew up in Mansfield, Ohio. What is it like?

MCNAIR I'll tell you what's in Mansfield, Ohio. One of the best things is the First Congregational Church, which is my home church and a place that is very, very dear to my heart. My mother is in Mansfield and lots of friends are there.

BLOOM When did you begin to think of yourself as a singer?

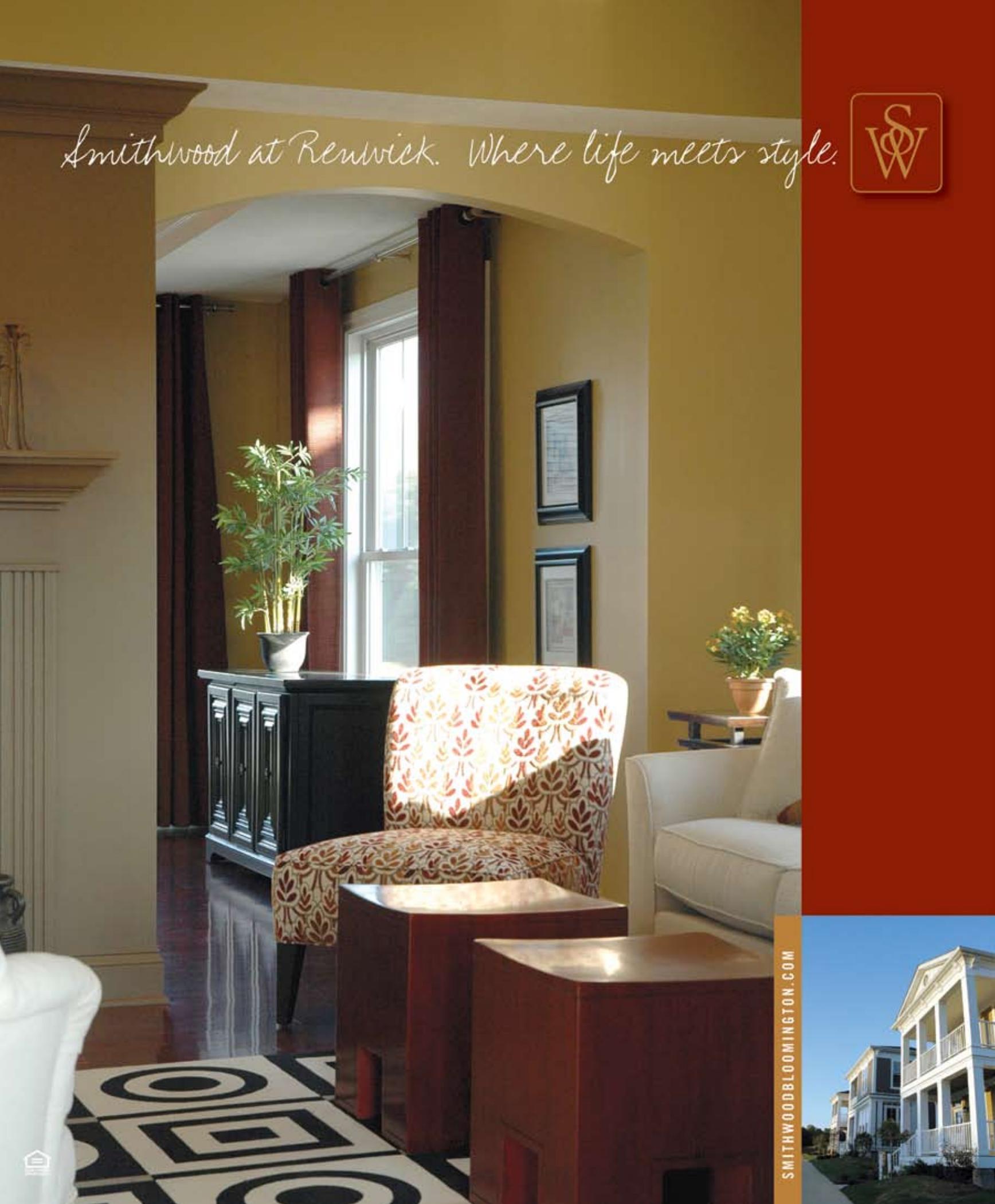
MCNAIR I'm still working on that! I actually went to college as a violin performance major. I wanted to pursue the violin professionally. It was a very wise violin teacher who actually said to me that I should take some singing

lessons because he knew it would make me a better violinist if I started dealing with breathing and phrasing. He knew it would make me draw the bow across the violin in a more sensitive way. Well, lo and behold, after about a year of those singing lessons I realized I was having more fun practicing singing than I was practicing the violin. Hindsight being 20/20, I think it's because I love words. And as a violinist you don't get to wrap yourself up in great lyrics and you don't get to taste the flavor of languages. Violinists are melody people. The other great thing about singing, you can have eye contact with your audience. All of those things—the words and eye contact and knocking down that invisible wall that is between the stage and the audience—all of those are things that I love.

BLOOM You came to IU for your master's and you worked with [world-famous operatic soprano and former IU voice instructor] Virginia Zeani.

MCNAIR I did! Isn't she something? I adore her and I'm not nearly in close enough contact with her. You know, I learned more about Virginia Zeani and her career when I read her book just two or three years ago than I ever knew when I was her student. I'm not exactly

Smithwood at Renwick. Where life meets style.



SMITHWOODBLOOMINGTON.COM





Sylvia, the ballplayer.

proud that I didn't know more when I was a student but I have really grown to appreciate the incredible career that she enjoyed.

BLOOM You were part of a tradition of opera and Virginia was your teacher. What do you convey in teaching musically but also personally because a great teacher is an example, an inspiration?

MCNAIR One of the things that I try so hard to do in teaching my own students is that each person has his or her own vocal fingerprint. I don't think two singers should ever sound the

same. Every singer should sound like an individual because we are each individual human beings and I try to make sure that my students sound like they sound. Therefore, I don't do a lot of demonstrating in the studio because I don't want anybody trying to copy how I sing. I want Diondra to be Diondra, I want Vasiliki to be Vasiliki, and Ryan to be Ryan. I don't want them to sound like Sylvia. The other thing that I emphasize is that singing should be fun! If we're not having fun doing it, let's go do something else. You know that gets lost sometimes in the professional world where everyone is so driven and ambitious and success rules.

I would really rather be working in the B houses and having a ball than working in the A houses and having so much stress I can't sleep at night.

BLOOM How do you prepare yourself for a role?

MCNAIR Oh, it depends on the role. Right at this moment something popped into my head, the very first time I had the assignment of the role of Susanna in *The Marriage of Figaro*. Whoa! That is a big part and it's a very aerobic part on top of being difficult to sing. It took me months to prepare but here's how I did it. I got a fabulous coach in New York, and she said "Okay, get ready Sylvia because Susanna is one of the largest parts in the whole repertory. Here's how I suggest you do it. Learn the arias first, learn the duets second, learn the trios third, learn the quartets fourth, and then learn the ensembles. And at some point in there, start weaving in learning all the recitative because there is so much recitative." So that's, believe it or not, how I still do it.

Another of the ways that I learn is to dig into the text, probably to a fault. Some people might say I over-study my texts and my involvement with the words. But, for example, going back to Susanna in *The Marriage of Figaro*, one of the things I did was to hand-write every single word that Susanna speaks and Susanna hears. I wrote it out on a legal pad like a play in Italian, and underneath each Italian word I translated it into English. So, even though the English doesn't always make sense when you do it that way, to my brain, I had a specific English word to go with every syllable and every word in Italian. It got so that when I was performing, it was incomprehensible to me that everybody in the room couldn't understand it as well as I did. That's how deeply I let it soak into me. So that's one of the ways I memorize; I approach these things as plays first and opera or singing second.

BLOOM Is there any role in which you really felt you became the character?

MCNAIR Many, thank you! I know that's incredibly immodest to say. There were roles that I just woke up feeling like I had become the character. Susanna definitely was one of them because I sang so many productions of that opera. I think I became Poppea in *The Coronation of Poppea*, another opera I sang many, many times. Now, she's not a nice girl. In fact she's a horrible person. Here's a woman who insists that her boyfriend kill off his secretary of state and she insists he put his wife out to sea in a boat with no paddle.

But I so enjoyed acting that part for a little bit of time. I became Poppea.

BLOOM I'd like to talk a bit about your career. I always believe that some of the wonderful things that happen in our lives are not planned, that they come at a fortuitous moment. I was looking in your biography about the visit of Robert Shaw [then the director and conductor of the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra] who came to Bloomington to conduct a performance of the Bach *B Minor Mass* and you were the soprano soloist. Was that expected?

MCNAIR Robert Shaw coming to Bloomington in the fall of 1980 was perhaps the best piece of luck of many, many huge pieces of luck that I've enjoyed. Robert Porco [then chairman of the choral department at the IU School of Music] chose me to be the soprano soloist for the Bach *B Minor Mass*. Mr. Shaw was here and from that point on, he hired me to sing with him in so many places, in so much repertoire. I made my European debut with him. I made my first recording with him. I made my New York Philharmonic debut with him. It goes on and on and on. I have often said, I would be pouring coffee in

upstate New York if it weren't for Robert Shaw. To say I am grateful is the understatement of the millennium.

BLOOM The year 1982 was great for you. You won the Metropolitan Opera National Council Auditions, you made your London concert debut, and you received a Grammy nomination for Poulenc's *Gloria*.

MCNAIR Isn't that unbelievable? My very first recording, I actually was nominated and I didn't win but I was nominated for a Grammy.

There was never one performance [at the Metropolitan Opera] that I didn't stand there and think, "Oh my gosh, this is the Met!"

Oh, and the Metropolitan was overwhelming, intimidating, terrifying. Yes, well, in 1982 they were still doing the National Metropolitan Auditions in a manner such that all eleven finalists were considered "winners," and I put that in quotes. They didn't pare down any further than the eleven finalists. I'm sure I would not have made the top two or the top five because I was not one of the stars. They've changed it since

but it was overwhelming. In fact I remember in the final concert I believe the aria I sang was from the opera *Manon* by Massenet, which I got to do for the very first time in my life here at IU. I also was programmed to sing the "Letter Duet" from Act Three of *The Marriage of Figaro* with my pal Nancy Gustafson singing the Countess and I was singing Susanna, so of course I'm the one who actually had to do the writing of the letter and the holding of the letter as we proofread it singing "Sull'aria." I was shaking so badly. I mean it was ridiculous. Standing on the stage of the Metropolitan

Opera is overwhelming and so terrifying.

I will confess this, there was not one performance that I sang in that opera house—and I only did four seasons, but that's more seasons than a lot of people get, and I don't know how many performances I did in those four seasons, but there was never one performance that I didn't stand there and think, "Oh my gosh, this is the Met!"

INDIANA UNIVERSITY OPERA & BALLET Theater

Susannah
by Carlisle Floyd
OCTOBER 19, 20 26, 27
8:00 PM

La Bohème
by Giacomo Puccini
NEW PRODUCTION
NOVEMBER 9, 10 16, 17
8:00 PM

The Nutcracker
by Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky
NOVEMBER 30
DECEMBER 1
8:00 PM
DECEMBER 1, 2
3:00 PM
NEW CHOREOGRAPHY
by Michael Vernon

music.indiana.edu/opera MUSICAL ARTS CENTER | 855-7433 music.indiana.edu/ballet



Onstage at the MAC, in her student days.

BLOOM You've had some great conductors that you've worked with. Leonard Slatkin [National Symphony Orchestra, Washington, DC] who has joined you at IU, Kurt Masur [London Philharmonic Orchestra], Seiji Ozawa [Vienna State Opera]. What's the interaction between the singer and the conductor? What is that connection?

MCNAIR One of the things that I am extremely grateful for in my career is that I have worked with a lot of amazing conductors. Maybe I've had those opportunities because I have so many years of instrumental playing in my background and I think that has affected how I sing. I sing like instrumentalists play and I think conductors respond to that. I've always said the best conductors are those who continue to perform themselves. Whether it's on the piano, cello, or singing, it gives them some sympathy for what the soloist is going through. Claudio Abbado, there's another one I worked with. I worked with him a lot, John Eliot Gardiner and André Previn, also. They understand something about the singing mechanism—the breathing, the connection with text, the connection with audience.

BLOOM You know, you've sung in opera houses and you've sung on concert stages, but you've also sung for the Supreme Court where you were invited by Justice Sandra Day O'Connor. And you sang for Pope John Paul II.

MCNAIR Well, I'll start with the Pope. Although I'm not Catholic, that was a performance that felt like an enormous honor and I'll tell how that came about. The Austrian Embassy decided that they wanted to give the Pope a birthday gift so they sent the Vienna Philharmonic and a group of soloists and a wonderful chorus called the Arnold Schoenberg Choir from Vienna to the Vatican to do a concert. It was June 2000, he turned 80 that year. I was lucky enough to be chosen as the soprano soloist for that. It was in the concert hall that seats 7,000 people where he received people. So, 7,000 of his closest friends were invited to that performance. It was broadcast live all over Europe so there were television lights and cameras everywhere. It was an amazing event.

BLOOM What about the Supreme Court. Do they appreciate music?

MCNAIR Well, this is fun. Sandra Day O'Connor and her husband John O'Connor

**Before you make a
commitment, we'll discuss
all your options, and
what each option costs—
at closing, and
in the long run.**

**COMPLETE
TRANSPARENCY.**

**ONLY AT
LOTUS MORTGAGE.**

It's that simple.



LOTUS
MORTGAGE

The Right Loan. The Right Service.
The Right Thing To Do.

Call or email to set up your confidential consultation. You will not be pressed for any commitment.

The truth is free.

118 South College Avenue
Bloomington, IN 47404
812-333-1200
marcus@lotusmortgage.org
www.lotusmortgage.org



Marcus Reed
Founder and Broker
Lotus Mortgage

heard me sing a concert in Washington, DC, with the National Symphony Orchestra. And Sandra Day O'Connor went back to the court. They had in place at that time a concert series. Now "series" is stretching it slightly because there was only one concert per year. But in any case, she was in charge that year and she called the administrator of the series, and said, "See if you can get Sylvia McNair to come sing for us." I think they had these concerts because the one thing they could all agree on was that they all loved music. I became friends with Sandra Day O'Connor. She had me sit with her in her chambers and she took me on a tour and it was a very, very exciting thing for me to do.

BLOOM And then there was Salzburg with Hillary Clinton.

MCNAIR That was the summer that Chelsea was college shopping and Bill was, I don't know, doing something with G8, and Hillary and Chelsea came to Salzburg. I was one of the artists in the Salzburg Festival that summer. It was 1997, I think. So there I was, the American in town, so they asked me to sing for Hillary and I sang a lot of stuff and at the end of the program she came running up to me, and said, "Oh! Would you like to come to the White House? Would you give me singing lessons? I'm tone deaf."

BLOOM You've also sung at the Oak Room at the Algonquin Hotel and at the Rainbow Room in New York City, as well as on Broadway. You started off as an opera singer. What about this shift to popular and theater music? Opera singers don't often make that transition.

MCNAIR I have often said that I had to learn how to sing opera. This kind of music, the theater music, just falls out of me. I feel like I was born to sing this music.

BLOOM Let's talk about life in Bloomington. But let's start a little earlier because some of us actually remember you as an announcer on WFIU in the early 1980s.

MCNAIR "Broadcasting at 103.7 FM, this is WFIU Bloomington, Indiana." It was terrific! I love radio because you don't have to worry about a bad hair day! Interesting music, interesting news. I couldn't do it now because I'm such an idiot when it comes to technology.

BLOOM What's that like coming back? Is there a different feel? Are you glad to be with students?



Because it's hard enough managing wonder boy.

We understand that life has a way of taking you over, making it hard to manage your time and your money.

That's why we've been working hard to provide easier and more convenient ways to access your account.

Here's how:

- Surcharge-free ATM network
- 2,600 Shared Branching locations nationwide
- Enhanced Bank-by-Phone account access
- Automated payments
- **FASTRACK**: A faster loan process
- Online loan applications and prequalifications

Learn more at iucu.org or visit any branch.

We're faster than ever!
Fastrack
Your ticket to a faster loan process!

IU Credit Union
Great Rates. Great Service.
 812-855-7823 | www.iucu.org

Equal Housing Lender Member NCUA

trust us—you'll hate yourself if you miss out.

Over 66% SOLD!



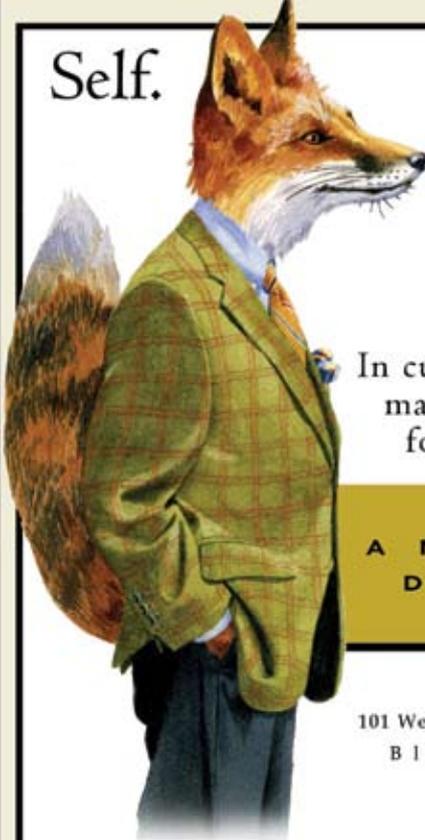

Spacious sunlit rooms, stunning architectural details. Stainless appliances and designer fixtures throughout. Floorplans and options that are refreshing as an autumn day. Stop by our model and see for yourself. **Paired Lifestyle Homes at Renwick from the mid \$200s.**

CAMERON ROW at RENWICK

330-8009 | CameronRow.com

WSHomes

Self. Assured.



In custom clothing made especially for you from

**A N D R E W
D A V I S**
menswear

Fountain Square
101 West Kirkwood, Suite 119
Bloomington
812-323-7730

One of a Kind

Some fantasies need only one X.



Solstice GXP shown in Mean Yellow

Every line an outpouring of roadster essence. Every detail focused on performance. An eager, responsive engine. Short-throw shifts. Balanced rear-wheel drive. Solstice is designed to run, stop and turn as effortlessly as it turns heads. In other words, the expectations raised by Solstice's provocative exterior are fully realized by what's under the skin.

CurryAutoCenter.com
2906 Buick Cadillac Blvd ■ 812-339-2227



That's brunette Sylvia on the left with her pal Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor.

MCNAIR I really was worried that it would feel like I was coming "back." I now see that I have come "forward" to Bloomington. Yes, I moved my things back to Bloomington. But this was not back, this was forward and that feels really, really good.

BLOOM And in many ways the classroom can be as challenging as a live performance on the stage?

MCNAIR It's different. It's apples and oranges, but I am a little bit nervous in front of hypercritical students, although they're not *The New York Times* or the *London Times* criticizing you. But they are very smart and they know a lot and they know that they're talented and it can be a little nerve wracking and yes, it is very exhilarating. Especially when it goes well! And I'll tell you something else. And I want to be very clear about this, teaching is the best teacher. Teaching is the best teacher! And I think that in my own performances, now that I'm traveling around and working, I honestly think that I am doing some of the best singing of my life at age 50 because I'm doing what I'm teaching and it works and it changes you. A lot of things have changed me, of course. There

aren't any secrets in my life. I'm a cancer survivor and that has changed me enormously. But just teaching itself, teaching is the best teacher.

BLOOM You've spoken openly about being a cancer survivor and many people have appreciated hearing from you about how you faced these challenges over the past months. You've seen this almost as a purposeful mission, haven't you?

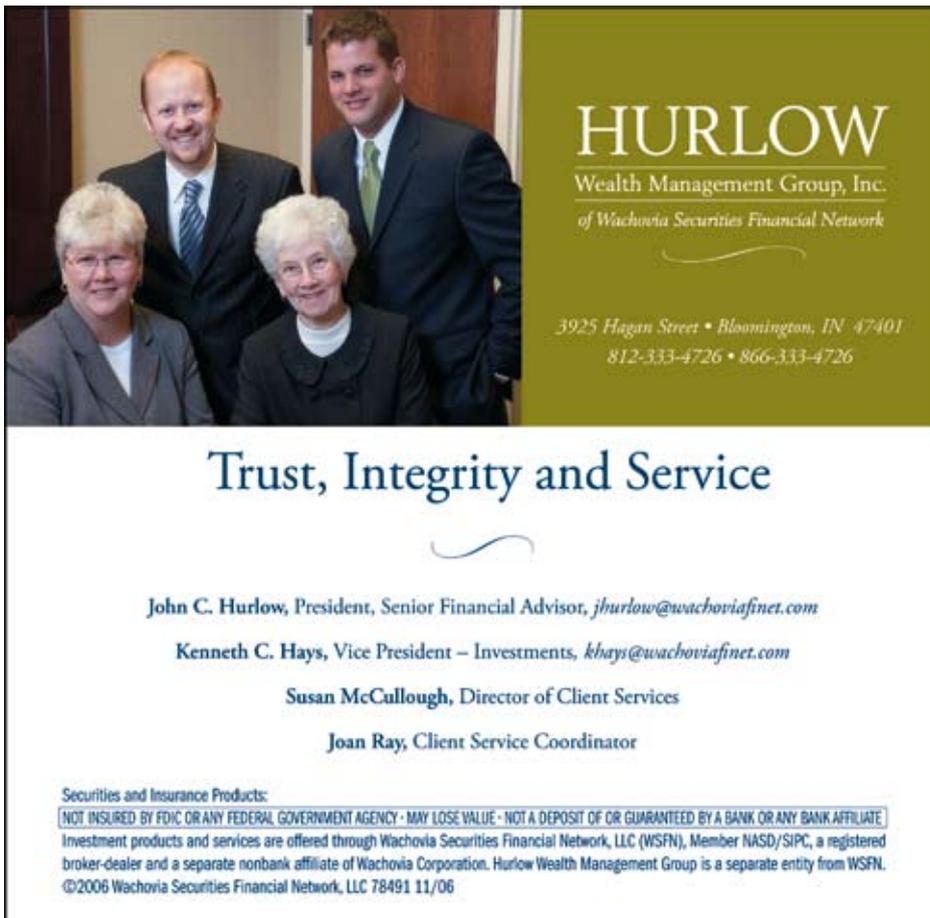
MCNAIR Well, I've said many times that if my journey with cancer can't be put to good use to help somebody else then it was all a big waste of time. I want to talk about it. There is nothing about my now year-and-a-half long cancer journey that is a secret. It is all right out there in the open. And that's fine with me. I'm choosing to do that. I have had many surgeries, six at last count. Months of chemotherapy, of radiation, of physical therapy. My body is forever altered. My spirit is forever altered. And the way I have decided to deal with it is that I always try to find the paradise in the, well, my phrase is the four-letter word that starts with an s. The paradise

I really was worried that it would feel like I was coming back. I now see that I have come forward to Bloomington.

is in the crap. Sometimes it's as silly as going and buying a new wig when you're bald, sometimes it's as silly as when I get scared I throw a dinner party. The scarier cancer gets, the more parties I throw. I have a photo album full of cancer photos, dinner parties, and head-shaving parties, and all kinds of things. The scarier it gets, I just throw another party because I don't know how else to do it without losing my mind.

BLOOM In a way it's an existential choice, isn't it? It's living in the moment and not allowing the illness to take the moment away from you.

MCNAIR Well, I've said from the start that I'm in denial. I'm not sure it's really denial I'm in because I do show up for my appointments. But what I definitely am in is a state of refusal. I refuse to let this disease knock me over for good. It has knocked me down many times, but I just keep getting back up because I just refuse to let this evil, evil disease kill me.



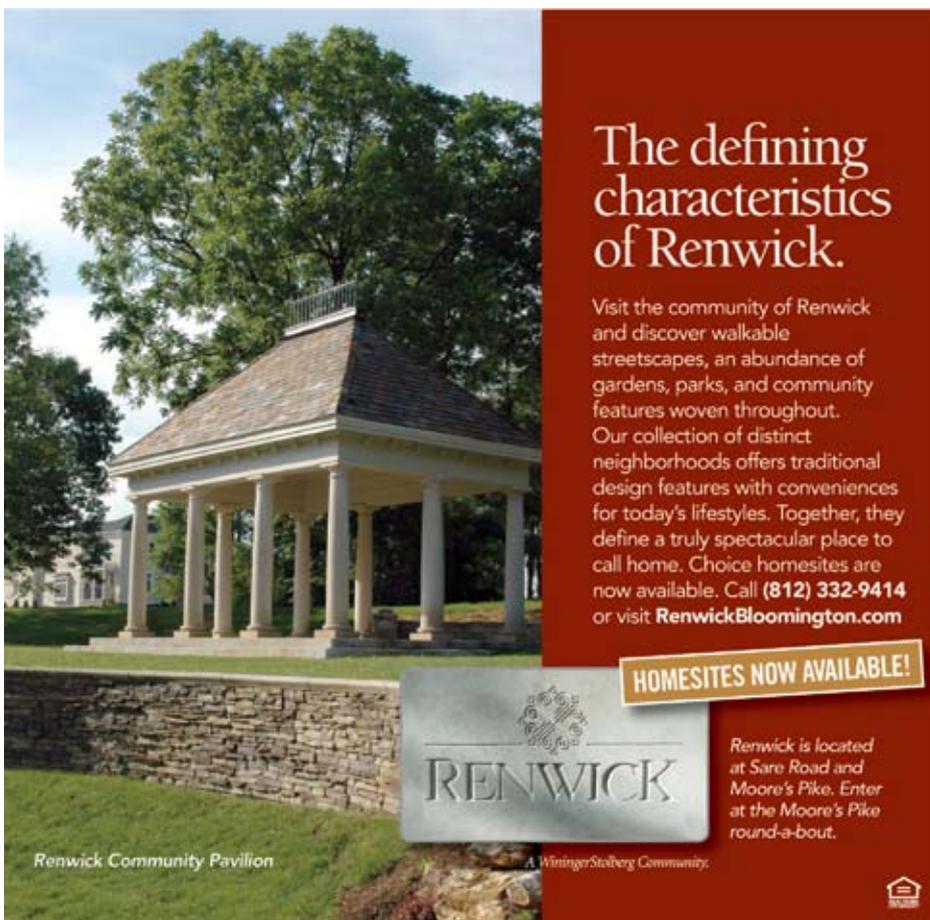
HURLOW
Wealth Management Group, Inc.
of Wachovia Securities Financial Network

3925 Hagan Street • Bloomington, IN 47401
812-333-4726 • 866-333-4726

Trust, Integrity and Service

John C. Hurlow, President, Senior Financial Advisor, jhurlow@wachoviafinet.com
Kenneth C. Hays, Vice President – Investments, khays@wachoviafinet.com
Susan McCullough, Director of Client Services
Joan Ray, Client Service Coordinator

Securities and Insurance Products:
NOT INSURED BY FDIC OR ANY FEDERAL GOVERNMENT AGENCY - MAY LOSE VALUE - NOT A DEPOSIT OF OR GUARANTEED BY A BANK OR ANY BANK AFFILIATE
Investment products and services are offered through Wachovia Securities Financial Network, LLC (WSFN), Member NASD/SIPC, a registered broker-dealer and a separate nonbank affiliate of Wachovia Corporation. Hurlow Wealth Management Group is a separate entity from WSFN.
©2006 Wachovia Securities Financial Network, LLC 78491 11/06



The defining characteristics of Renwick.

Visit the community of Renwick and discover walkable streetscapes, an abundance of gardens, parks, and community features woven throughout. Our collection of distinct neighborhoods offers traditional design features with conveniences for today's lifestyles. Together, they define a truly spectacular place to call home. Choice homesites are now available. Call (812) 332-9414 or visit RenwickBloomington.com

HOMESITES NOW AVAILABLE!

Renwick is located at Sare Road and Moore's Pike. Enter at the Moore's Pike round-a-bout.

RENWICK
A WinstingerStalberg Community.

Renwick Community Pavilion



Looking good at 50.

The scarier cancer gets, the more parties I throw. I have a photo album full of cancer photos, dinner parties, and head-shaving parties.

BLOOM You seem to have put all your energy, your creativity, your stamina that you've learned in your career into your health.

MCNAIR Maybe that's what it is. I mean, I don't deny the fact that there is an element of performance in the way I'm choosing to live with cancer. There is an element of performing it, of performing looking good, performing being happy, performing living well. And yeah, being a performer has definitely helped me stand up and smile and try to look as good as it's possible to look when you're bald. I wear adorable baseball caps and fabulous-looking green and pink wigs and I have two peroxide blonde wigs and two brown wigs. My wig repertoire is stunning! But I mean, that's how I'm finding the paradise in the four-letter word.

BLOOM Is Bloomington a nurturing community?

MCNAIR Oh, it's incredible. I'm so happy to be here. I have a medical community that takes such great care of me. We've all become friends, we dine out together, and they all come to my parties and we're all on a first-name basis. I'm very, very blessed and lucky to be under the care of these great doctors and nurses and technicians. I guess I've traded in "Why, oh why, oh why-oh" for "My Sweet Indiana Home." ✨

PERIODONTICS & DENTAL IMPLANT CENTER of Southern Indiana



Dr. Sutor was great before, during, and after my surgery. He made sure that I understood what was happening every step of the way and that I was happy with the final result. Having my implant is great! I don't have to worry about my loose baby tooth or a temporary tooth that could fall out. The best part is nobody can ever tell! People don't believe me when I tell them it's fake! Which always makes me smile even bigger.



Mark A. Sutor, DDS, MSD



I had implants placed by Dr. Sutor 14 years ago! My implants feel like my natural teeth. I can't imagine having to wear a denture or a partial ever again!

Most Experienced Dental Implant Surgeon in Southern IN

• 379 South Park Ridge Road • Bloomington, IN 47401
 • Phone: (812) 333-4550 • (800) 494-4550 • Fax: (812) 333-5789
www.sutordds.com

HOW TO BUILD THAT FALL WARDROBE.

Locate, select, and assemble
your materials. Construct a great look.

Put your body into it.

Oh, yeah, and do it here.

SIMON
MALLS

more choices*

COLLEGE MALL

simon.com



Bandolino, Macy's, Victoria's Secret, Smith's Sport'n Shoe, Sears, Finish Line, The Buckle, Target, Footlocker, Hollister, Abercrombie & Fitch, Old Navy, American Eagle Outfitters, PacSun, Journeys, Charlotte Russe, Dick's Sporting Goods, Deb, Payless Shoe Source, K&S Menswear, Hot Topic. Located at 2894 E 3rd St, Bloomington, IN. Shopping Line® 812.339.3054.