

# SOUTHBURY MAKERS SPOTLIGHT



## Michele McDonald, singer, actor, writer, and teacher

By Kelly Keenan, SEDC Arts & Culture Subcommittee

Photos courtesy of the artist

### **Q: Tell us a little about yourself.**

**A:** I am a singer, actor, writer, and teacher, dedicated to various creative pursuits. Since graduating from college in 2022, I have been working on my third short play. I became a grandmother the same year and will celebrate 34 years of marriage to my supportive husband, Tom, this September. We have two adult children, Luke and Alicia, and we are also very close to our daughter-in-law Katie, and Alicia's partner Phil. I also have one grandchild, Andrew. After decades away from acting, I re-enrolled as a theater performance major at Western Connecticut State University and received an Irene Ryan Acting Scholarship nomination for my role in "Be More Funny and Other Short Plays." This experience, conducted during the pandemic, shifted my interest towards film making, and I earned significant praise for my performance.

My involvement with The Connecticut Master Chorale includes memorable performances at Carnegie Hall, the Lincoln Center, and the White House. Singing at the White House was a significant highlight, occurring just three years after the chorale's formation and one year after I joined. Additionally, I performed American songs with The Danbury Concert Chorus in Havana, Cuba, in 2000, a special experience given my father's roots in the region. Throughout my career, these opportunities have been among the many enriching experiences that have shaped my journey in the performing arts. I also taught for 16 years, the Southbury School of Performing Arts.

### **Q: What initially drew you to the arts, and how long have you been doing it?**

**A:** I came from a musical and theatrical family; my grandparents were singers, and many relatives are performers or teachers today. I've been singing since I was 18 months old, with my favorite songs by the Rolling Stones. From 4th grade onward, I sang in various groups, including Madrigal singers and rock bands. At age 10, I produced my first play for my brother's 3rd-grade class, handling everything from costumes to directing. This early experience sparked my love for making people laugh and led me to gravitate towards comedies and musical theater in school.

Although I lost interest in college due to limited performance opportunities, I returned to finish my degree after many years of marriage and becoming an empty nester. Despite the challenges of the pandemic and caring for my ill father, I graduated as a Theatre Performance Major from WCSU. During my studies, I discovered a talent for playwriting in addition to acting and directing, making the experience worthwhile despite personal and global challenges.

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**Q: What is your favorite part of the creative process ? Least favorite?**

**A:** My favorite part of the creative process is the moment when something you have been working on or looking for...clicks. Like when I hear the same phrase in the song we have been rehearsing but all of a sudden makes sense to me now...I find the perfect dialogue that suits me and it's funny...or I get a great idea for the next scene of the play I've been writing. There is no part of the creative process that I don't enjoy to some degree. Anytime I am engaging in anything innovative, or imaginative I am in my happy place. However, if I had to choose something, then it would have to be auditioning. It can become a very stressful environment when you think that the directors are just there to judge you. Now I think of it as sharing my art and my gifts and giving them the chance to have me in their play or musical. It helps me get through them, but they're still my least favorite part of the business.

**Q: How long have you been in Southbury? What brought you here / keeps you here?**

**A:** My husband Tom and I moved to Southbury in September of 2001. We were living in Danbury where I was born and raised and lived most of my life. Our children were 7 and 4 when we moved here because of the excellent educational system. Now that our children are grown, we stay for the wonderful friends we've made in the lovely community we have become a part of over the last 23 years.

**Q: Is there a special place in Southbury you go for inspiration?**

**A:** I always want to be outside in the warm weather enjoying nature. Kettletown State Park is a peaceful place and my husband and I like to walk the trail there in the evenings or watch our grandson on the swings at Ballentine Park. My mom moved into Heritage Village two months ago and now we have another Southburian in the family. H.V. is also a lovely place to enjoy quiet walks and contemplate new ideas for a comedy act, a screenplay, or maybe a novel.

**Q: Do you have any advice for creatives who are trying to find their voice?**

**A:** My advice to emerging artists who are trying to find their voice is to study every style of music they can. The more musical genres you explore, the better chance you have of finding your niche. I grew up listening to pop, soft rock, and disco music on the radio. My parents also exposed me to famous vocalists from the 50s-70s and show tunes. When I was in high school I started attending rock concerts, such as Genesis, Pat Benatar, Rush, and R.E.M. which is why I gravitated towards that genre. My mother was hoping I would continue my classical training and pursue a career in opera, but for me, that couldn't compete with being a singer in a rock band.

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