

Age-old folk song comes to life in children's book and CD

"Good morning class."

"Good morning, Ms. Melton."

PLANO'S ALDRIDGE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL music teacher **Sue McCallum Melton** closes the CD player and summons her students to her rocking chair where she holds up a book called ***Chairs to Mend***. The "chirp, chirp" of birds and "clippity clop" of horses hoofs reverberate through the speaker as the third-graders' imaginations drift to a summer day in 1885 Boston. Two dozen ears perk up to the voice of the narrator on the CD, the all-too-familiar voice of Ms. Melton. "In 1885, a young lady named Rachel lived in Boston, Massachusetts..."

In less than 10 minutes, the students meet a chair mender, a fishmonger, and a ragman on the bustling streets of Boston. With each encounter, they learn the musical chants one would hear on a typical day there in the 1880s. By the end of the book, Rachel, the main character, creates a song, and Ms. Melton encourages the students to do the same: "Just listen to the world around you!" she implores. Then, she invites questions from her audience.

One girl raises her hand. "Was it hard to write the book?"

Ms. Melton answers, "No, it was pretty easy."

"Who did the illustrations?" another girl inquires.

"His name is Bill Young. He used to work for Disney and now works in Dallas."

"Where can you find the book?" a shy boy in the back wants to know.

"You can check it out at our school library, or you can visit chairstomend.com."

Then Ms. Melton asks, "Who do you think was doing the narration?"

"YOU!" reply the kids in unison.

"Did I do all of the singing?"

"Nooo."

"I did do some of it. I was the fish seller and sang *Mackerel, fresh mackerel*," Ms. Melton sings in a soprano voice. "My son sang *Chairs to mend, old chairs to mend*," lowering her pitch to alto. "And my husband sang, *Any old rags, any old rags*," her voice dropping even lower to a baritone note.

Ms. Melton and her students seesaw back and forth in more Q-and-A. She reveals that her brother-in-law Bart is a DJ for Sirius XM Radio and simulated the sound effects.

"What sound effects did you hear in the story?" Ms. Melton asks.

"The pitter-patter of the horses' hoofs," answers one student.

"The seagulls in the market," answers another.

Before dismissing class, Ms. Melton thanks her third-graders for being good listeners and they line up at the door for their next class. Walking down the hallway, a few of them begin humming, "*Chairs to mend, old chairs to mend*."

According to Ms. Melton—we'll call her Sue from now on—the rhythm for the



Aldridge Elementary School music teacher **Sue McCallum Melton** presents her book, ***Chairs to Mend***, to her third-grade students. Profile photo

song "Chairs to Mend" is used in the Kodály Method, an educational approach that assigns syllables (*ti, ta, tam*) to note values to express duration. For example, quarter notes are expressed by the syllable *ta*, while eighth-note pairs are expressed by shorter syllables *ti-ti*. Larger note values, like whole notes, are expressed by extending *ta* to *ta-a-a*.

Sue explains that the chant "Chairs to Mend" incorporates a dotted quarter note followed by an eighth note, which is expressed as *tam-ti*. So, "Chairs to Mend" is expressed as *tam-ti ta, ta tam-ti ta*.

"All Plano music teachers are trained in the Kodály Method, which is based on folk literature, to develop music literacy," said Sue. "We want our children to be able to read and sing in tune."

Some 20 years ago, Sue took a summer course in the Kodály Method at the

University of North Texas. There, she met a group of Plano teachers who told her about a job opening at Aldridge Elementary. “I lived in Richardson so I couldn’t turn it down,” she said. “I was kind of hoping to stay home for two more years

because I had two preschoolers, but it was a great

opportunity.” She paused and added, “It was really a blessing.”

Sue teaches music to K–5 students. “I’m the only music teacher at Aldridge; if it’s music, I do it!” she says enthusiastically.

Her students demand an *allegro* performance out of her every school day, but summers call for slower days—her tempo eases to *adagio*, and Sue spends time teaching piano and designing jewelry.



She has called Richardson home for 22 years but grew up in Dallas where she attended Hillcrest High School. Sue always wanted to pursue a music career. “From about junior high, I had decided that’s what I wanted to do. I

loved choir.”

And that’s what Sue did first, teach high school choir.

She also taught at Southern Methodist University as a teacher’s assistant, and said going from teaching college-age students to elementary age was a transition. “It gives you a good idea of where the kids are heading and what kind of background will help them,” she said. “Plus, having my three kids go through the Plano school system and all the extracurricular activities, I can give the kids at Aldridge a heads up because I’ve experienced it

through my own children.”

That’s right, all three of Sue’s children—Rachel, William and Byron—attended Plano schools, including Aldridge Elementary where Sue taught all of them. She chose to teach in PISD because she wanted to be in the same district as her children.

Rachel, William and Byron graduated from Plano Senior High School. Rachel recently finished her sophomore year at Oklahoma University (OU); William graduated from OU this year; and Byron recently got married. (Sue and her husband will be celebrating their 35th anniversary next year!)

Chairs to Mend was truly a family affair. “It was definitely a family project,” the author agreed. “My family is all very musical.

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We recorded it in the back bedroom of my house. William knew what he was doing when he was recording; we turned off the AC and made sure nobody was mowing the yard next door," she laughed. "We needed it to be as quiet as possible."

Sue used her children's names for the characters' names in the book, too. That was the easy part; the hard part, said Sue, was researching 19th-century Boston. "I have quite a bit of research on how the chants came from England. The reason I picked Boston was because I couldn't find mackerel anywhere except that area."

She continued, "At least half of the kids in every class don't know what mackerel is, and they can come up with some bizarre stuff. That's what's great about this book. The children not only learn a song that we use in the

classroom, but they also learn some Social Studies, and hopefully some new vocabulary."

Before Sue published *Chairs to Mend*, she told the story to a class of fourth-graders, making it up as she went along and singing all the voices. She recalled, "The first time I told the story, the students were captivated. One of them said, 'You ought to write a book!' Well, shortly thereafter, I wrote it."

When *Chairs to Mend* was published, Sue presented the story to the same class that had inspired her to write the book. The students were in fifth grade by then.

"The fifth-graders just loved it!" said Sue. "They stood up and clapped!"

And surely, they walked away humming, *Chairs to mend, old chairs to mend.* — BRIT MOTT

excerpt

From *Chairs to Mend*

One June morning, as the children were eating their breakfast in the kitchen, Rachel heard a sound from outside. Of course all the windows were open (there was no air conditioning in 1885!). It was the familiar sound of a wagon coming down the street. The horse's hoofs were making a distinct "clippity clop" on the cobblestones. She thought she recognized the sound of the chair mender as he sang out his musical chant, "Chairs to mend, old chairs to mend."



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