



Anna Sessa of Woodstock, in the red hat, gestures to the singing crowd at the No Kings rally in Woodstock last Saturday. Foreground left to right, Shari Borzekowski of Killington and Christina Manero of Woodstock, the interim pastor of the Bethany Mennonite Church in Bridgewater, joined Sessa in leading the singing of protest songs. Pamela R. White Photo

Local activists lift their voices in harmony with the ‘Singing Resistance’ movement

By Tom Ayres
Senior Staff Writer

In a time-honored spirit of song and solidarity that wove a common thread from the women’s suffrage and early American labor movements of the late 19th and early 20th centuries through the Civil Rights and antiwar struggles of the 1960s, local singers are banding together to raise their voices in protest against the policies of the administration of President Donald J. Trump.

Singer-activists from at least 12 Upper Valley communities, including Woodstock and Hartland, have joined the nationwide Singing Resistance movement, which has its roots in Minne-



Left to right, Wendy Jenne of Bridgewater, Christina Manero of Woodstock, Shari Borzekowski of Killington, Anna Sessa of Reading, and No Kings rally organizer Courtney Hollingsworth of Woodstock led the crowd in song at Tribou Park last Saturday. Pamela R. White Photo

apolis in the wake of the police slaying of a Black man, George Floyd, in 2020. Fueled by indignance and wrath over the highly aggressive

law enforcement actions of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) officers in Minneapolis this past winter — including the

killings of American citizens Renee Nicole Good and Alex Pretti — the Singing Resis-

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Midway through the protest, demonstrators marched up Central Street with their signs, before turning right on Elm Street and making their way back to Tribou Park. MadMotion Photo

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tance crusade has blossomed into a countrywide chorus of tens of thousands of people giving voice to simple, newly crafted songs of protest and solidarity, channeling public ire about Trump administration actions ranging from the immigration crackdown to the decimation of arts and culture programs to the ongoing war in Iran and more.

Here in the local area, the ascendancy of the Singing Resistance movement asserted itself in abundance at No Kings gatherings in multiple communities last Saturday. Activists in the region began organizing community-based singers into musical “pods” roughly about six weeks ago to begin preparations for songful protest at last weekend’s No Kings events.

The Rev. Paul Sawyer, the minister of the First Universalist Society of Hartland, was a prime mover in bringing the Singing Resistance movement to the local area.

“It’s been spreading pretty far and wide, gaining momentum following the ICE actions in Minneapolis,” Sawyer told the Standard on Monday concerning the Singing Resistance effort. “Some of us learned about it and reached out to the UV Rise Up [activist group] and put out a call for anyone who was interested. We got together a whole group of Upper Valley people about a month ago and then adopted the structure of the national movement, which is decentralized. In many places, statewide movements are broken down into regional efforts and then further down into local, community-based pods,” Sawyer explained. Singing Resistance pods based locally include those in Woodstock, Hartland, Lebanon, Norwich, Thetford, South Royalton, and Hanover. Town-based singing groups range in size from five to twenty-five-plus voices — and the UV Rise Up group, which is helping to coordinate the organization of new singing pods in the area, estimates that 150 to 200 people are now giving voice to their concerns in song at No Kings events and other protest gatherings in the region.

Anna Sessa of Reading is one of those singing activists. Together with Killington resident Shari Borzekowski and Pastor Christina



From left, Shari Borzekowski, Anna Sessa, and Christina Manero led the singing of songs of protest and resistance at the No Kings rally at Tribou Park in Woodstock Village last Saturday. Pamela R. White Photo

Manero of Woodstock, the interim minister at the Bethany Mennonite Church in Bridgewater Corners, Sessa led the group sing at last Saturday’s No Kings rally at Tribou Park in Woodstock Village. The Woodstock pod of the Singing Resistance movement — now about 15 members strong — plans to continue meeting, rehearsing, and using song as a means of protest at many of the daily Tribou Park vigils that have been going on for the past 14 months.

Reached at her home as she was tucking a young child into bed on Monday evening, Sessa spoke of her ardent engagement with the Singing Resistance initiative.

“I’ve got very close family in the Minneapolis/St. Paul area — and seeing and hearing what their cities and communities have been going through has been heartbreaking,” Sessa offered. “We only get a little bit of what the media wants to share with us, but seeing all of the different ways that [people have been] coming out to support their neighbors and their community was really inspiring to me. There was a video on social media of the Singing Resistance there — and I thought, ‘Wow, what a cool way to approach supporting your community in so many different ways.’ They’re lifting up their community in really hard times,” Sessa added. “And I keep using the word community because

unity is part of community. “We know that previous resistance efforts have included song, so it only makes sense to follow that path,” she continued. “It’s about lifting each other up, making individuals feel seen and heard. [In Minneapolis and elsewhere], they’re using song to support neighbors who are hiding in their houses for fear of abduction, of harm. The [national Singing Resistance] group describes itself as ‘radically welcoming’: there’s even a song that welcomes ICE agents to reconsider the decisions that they’re making in the line of work that they do, urging them to leave that work behind and join a peaceful movement, a joyous movement.”

The songs of Singing Resistance are not the familiar protest songs of yore, such as “Blowin’ in the Wind,” “We Shall Overcome,” “Joe Hill,” “Down By the Riverside,” “Give Peace a Chance,” and “Which Side Are You On?” Instead, they are simple-to-sing, tightly worded mini-anthems of solidarity, many of them created in the wake of the slaying of George Floyd six years ago and in the aftermath of the more recent ICE killings and enforcement actions in Minneapolis in January. New musical tomes are added regularly to a songbook maintained by the national Singing Resistance movement. Here in the Upper Valley, the lyrics to several of the songs most frequently sung in the region are posted on the UV Rise Up website, together with links to recordings or public performances of those songs for those seeking to learn them at local pod gatherings. “Stronger Than Ever,” a song written by Minneapolis-based singer-songwriter Sarina Partridge, typifies the repertoire of the Singing Resistance musicians:

Our love is stronger than the fear (3x)
 We see the path before us and we are not afraid
 We are a mighty chorus and we are not afraid
 Hope, song, joy, courage, community
 “The songs from the Singing Resistance songbook are the primary ones for this particular movement,” Sawyer explained. “They’re all written to be short and repeating, so that they can be taught on the spot. They’re easy to sing

in that they don’t require any accompaniment. They’re really written for the resistance work that we are doing on the street, at rallies, or in immediate actions that might take place, such as at the South Burlington [ICE raids] of a couple of weeks ago. That’s not to say that the long history of protest music isn’t important — it’s just that these songs have these particular qualities and they’re being written for right now. A number of them are what I call solidarity songs. They’re not necessarily shouting about one particular thing that is going on; they’re really about trying to build strength, connection, and community through the actions that are taking place right now.”

Sawyer’s colleague in the regional faith community, Pastor Christina Manero of the Bethany Mennonite congregation in Bridgewater, has been helping to administer Singing Resistance efforts as part of the Woodstock pod of musical activists. She helped lead the singing at the most recent No Kings rally at Tribou Park, takes part in many of the daily vigils at the park, and is hosting weekly rehearsals and singing sessions at the small Mennonite chapel in Bridgewater Corners.

“I got started with [Singing Resistance] after I saw videos coming out of Minneapolis of folks singing as a form of solidarity with neighborhoods where people had been taken or people were scared to go outside because of ICE raids,” Manero shared in a conversation with the Standard last weekend. “I thought that was really powerful. And as a Christian, as a pastor, and as a Mennonite, loving our neighbors and loving our enemies is really important. So I thought I could get behind this movement — it’s definitely a secular movement, but the idea that we can sing together, not only for the people who we care the most about, but also for the people that are really hard to care about — such as ICE agents — that felt really important to me.

“I attended one of the online meetings of the national [Singing Resistance] group,” Manero added. “And then I was able to go to an in-person training in Norwich. They were encouraging this structure to form local singing pods, which is especially helpful in a place like Vermont and New Hampshire — this Upper Valley area — because it’s just so spread out. I saw people in Norwich that I already knew from Woodstock and so we sort of got together right then and there. We’ve been rehearsing for a few weeks now and we were just so excited to be in Tribou Park at the No Kings event on Saturday,” she concluded.