

'Parkinsong' concerts honor alumna

by Nicole Kukawski



Selma with her beloved children, Debra, Carol, and Rob.

In 2000, Rob Litowitz, Debra Litowitz Frank, and Carol Litowitz Golden, began talking about what they could do for their parents' upcoming 50th wedding anniversary.

A traditional celebration wouldn't do, for their mother, **Selma Litowitz '50**, had been struck with Parkinson's disease five years prior. When Debra, an assistant

professor of education at the College, suggested the family hold a Parkinson's-disease fundraiser for their anniversary, the siblings quickly connected with the many friends and associates the Trenton-based family had made since their parents began dating at Trenton Central High School in 1945.

Networking was surprisingly easy for the Litowitz family. The siblings just happened to grow up with Richard Kind, who co-starred with Parkinson's-afflicted Michael J. Fox on the hit television comedy *Spin City*. Rob frequently hosted mini-concerts at his home near Washington, DC, so he quickly contacted the many up-and-coming artists and producers he had encountered at his own home. Carol was friendly with Comedy Central's *Daily Show* host Jon Stewart during their years at Lawrence High School, where Selma had taught English from 1967 to 1988.

When Stewart learned of Selma's condition, he immediately agreed to host the fundraising event, for she had been

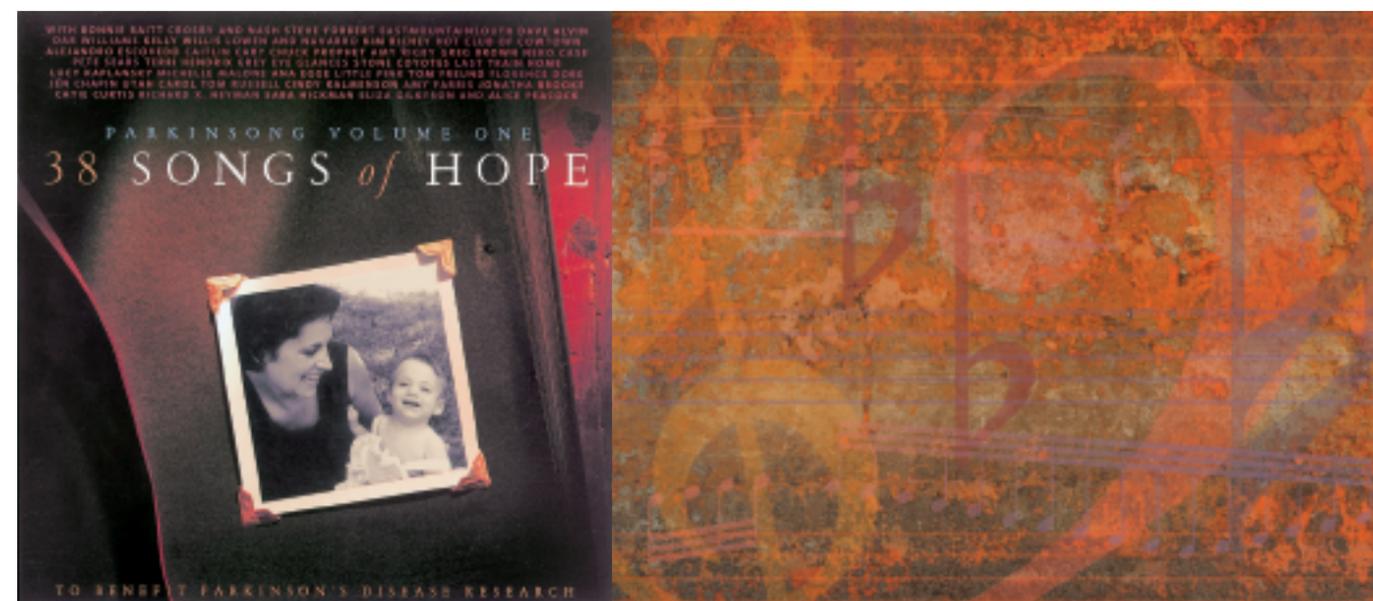
one of his favorite teachers. Stewart told the Associated Press in 2004 that she always indulged his in-class joking, while other teachers regularly shunned him.

Stewart hosted what became Parkinsong, a Parkinson's disease benefit concert that featured adult-alternative artists such as Ana Egge, Terri Hendrix, and Grey Eye Glances. The event, sponsored by the Litowitz family and the Parkinson Alliance in Princeton, was a huge success, providing a \$75,000 research grant to the University of Minnesota. However, the event was successful not because of the star-studded lineup alone—people came primarily to celebrate the lifelong success of a Lawrence High School teacher, Selma Litowitz.

"Half of the people in the room were so old that they didn't even know who Jon Stewart was," joked Frank, attesting to the fact that her mother was the main attraction. "A woman, who I thought looked really pretty old, came up to me and told me all about how much she loved my mother. I think she was from one of my mother's first classes."

Selma grew up in a very poor household in Trenton but, because she was very bright, she was awarded a full scholarship to New Jersey State Teachers College at Trenton, now The College of New Jersey. She married Mark, her high school sweetheart, in 1950 and, after having three children, the family moved to Lawrence Township.

"My mother always used to say, 'it's an ill wind that blows no good,'" Frank recalled. "I never really understood what that meant until all of this happened. I now understand it to mean that things



have to be really, really bad for nothing good to come of it."

It seems Selma's advice could not ring more true. Not only did the 50th wedding anniversary benefit concert produce grant money, it was popular enough for an equally successful event the following year, hosted by disc jockey Pierre Robert.

"The concerts also really brought my family together in a whole different way. My brother lives in Washington and my sister lives in Princeton, and we were able to form new, adult relationships with each other. We were never really the types to do things like this before," Frank added.

Music from the first two Parkinsong events is available in a two-disc set, *Parkinsong Volume 1: 38 Songs of Hope*, which pictures Selma and Debra, as a baby, on the cover. It was produced by Lloyd Maines, one of the world's greatest pedal guitarists and father of Natalie Maines of the country-rock band the Dixie Chicks.

The Litowitz family hopes to use this connection to develop a third concert as a memorial to Selma, who died

December 26, 2005, at The Greenwood House nursing home in Ewing. Debra and her brother, Rob, are out networking again, calling friends in the music industry, once more with the partnership of the Parkinson Alliance, but this time using the College as the venue, possibly in March 2007. The College is a natural site, they say, for not only was Selma an alumna and Debra a faculty member, but her husband's parents, **Arthur and Roberta Frank**, both Class of 1954, are active members of the Alumni Association. The couple also endowed the College's School of Music with a scholarship in memory of Hy Frank, Arthur's father.

"Hy also played music at my parents' wedding," added Debra Frank, laughing over the coincidence. "It seems that the College has been the hub, the center of my family's life. All things come back to TCNJ."

Nicole Kukawski '06 majored in English and interned in the Office of Public Affairs. For more information on Parkinsong, please visit www.parkinsong.com.

Selma Litowitz '50 and her baby daughter Debra, now a TCNJ faculty member, on the cover of the first Parkinsong CD.

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