

ILLINOIS VALLEY

woman

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A MEASURE OF SUCCESS

*Casey McGrath
changed her life
with Fiddlerock!*

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Changing Course

This violinist reinvented her life and couldn't be happier with the results

Story and Photos by Shannon Serpette

Casey McGrath had reached a point in her career many musicians dream of attaining – a comfortable, stable job in academia, putting her doctorate in music to use. For more than a decade, she served as an adjunct music professor, concertmaster, studio teacher, and guest concerto soloist with various orchestras.

When she realized, though, she had lost her passion for what she was doing, she decided to make a radical job shift when she was in her late 30s.

As a violinist, McGrath, who lives in Marseilles, wanted to be excited about the music she was playing. So in 2019, she decided to resign from her positions and focus on developing and performing Fiddlerock!, her solo violin act.

Fiddlerock! unites audiences of all backgrounds and musical tastes through popular music. It first began as ten handwritten pieces of sheet music performed on a borrowed sound system. Since then, the show has grown into a full light and sound production with more than 250 arrangements in nearly every musical genre, along with the help of her boyfriend, A.J., who is the sound technician and helps in other roles.

“Each show is different,” McGrath said, adding that she works hard to make it a multi-generational show so everyone can find something to enjoy or hear a popular song in a new way.

When McGrath first decided to

quit her orchestral and academic jobs to concentrate on Fiddlerock!, it was concerning to some of her loved ones who worried about this new journey, while others fully encouraged the change.

“It was kind of mixed,” she said.

While some may have had their concerns, all her loved ones ultimately understood that she needed to pursue her passion and see where she landed. She was no longer excited about what she was doing and couldn't envision doing it for decades longer.

“The music itself I was not excited about anymore,” she said, adding that she knew she had to choose. “I couldn't do orchestra and do Fiddlerock! I know this is not a traditional path, but I never considered myself traditional anyway.”

McGrath's journey to a musical career has been unique. Although she first started playing the violin

See **MCGRATH** page 9



Casey McGrath practices her violin at CatsEye Wine Bar in downtown Ottawa. This was one of the first locations she was invited to play her show.



The violin Casey McGrath plays is over 310 years old and was made in Milan.

McGrath

FROM PAGE 7

at age 8, she didn't have her first private lesson until she was 16 years old. Before that, she'd learn pieces by ear. She's also had setbacks along the way.

"In 2020, I was diagnosed with significant hearing loss," she said.

Protecting their hearing isn't something all musicians think about, but they should, she said, because it is a serious risk and concern.

Despite her untraditional path to music and having to learn the ins and outs of marketing herself as a musician because that isn't something she was taught in school, McGrath has managed to carve out a successful niche for herself.

One of the first local venues McGrath played was CatsEye Wine Bar in downtown Ottawa.

"She comes several times a year," co-owner Francie Skoflanc said, adding that her performance draws a big crowd. "We get a lot of tourists. We want to bring quality entertainment to our wine bar. Casey is one of my favorite performers and people."

McGrath now has five commercial recordings, thousands of Facebook followers, a YouTube channel, a packed performance schedule, and has set up a home recording studio. Perhaps most importantly, now at age 40, she feels she has found a healthy life-work balance, with her happiness and passion no longer playing second fiddle in her life.

"You have to look at what you can do forever," she said. "Having a lot of projects keeps me from getting bored."