

Spotlight On...

Children's Chorus of Springfield

The city of Springfield is home to a relatively new and rapidly expanding children's chorus that emphasizes community within an urban setting, breaks down social, cultural, and financial barriers, and believes in the power of music to change lives.

The Children's Chorus of Springfield (CCS), the brainchild of University of Massachusetts Amherst professor emeritus of music E. Wayne Abercrombie and retired Springfield Public Schools Visual and Performing Arts Director Vera S. Baker, held its first rehearsal in January 2008 after the two educators agreed that the City of Homes needed a children's city chorus to unite all of its neighborhoods, creating a powerful experience for participants and the city itself. Prior to the first rehearsal, Abercrombie and Baker held auditions in elementary schools' gymnasias, cafeterias, boiler rooms, classrooms – wherever they could hear students sing – thanks to the support of Superintendent Alan Ingram and the current Director of Visual and Performing Arts, Julie Jaron. The very successful first concert featured 25 fifth and sixth grade students.

Since that first concert, both community support and membership have grown substantially. The CCS now boasts 54 fourth through eighth graders from 25 Springfield schools with past performances at Trinity United Methodist Church, the Basketball Hall of Fame and the MassMutual Center. Professional development for educators has also been a focus of the CCS through workshops with Nick Page, famous song leader and director of the Mystic Chorale. Companies donating resources have included Babson Capital, the law offices of Bacon & Wilson, and TSM Design.

This year is shaping up to be a busy one for the CCS, with performances at Mayor Domenic Sarno's inaugural luncheon, the Martin Luther King, Jr. Breakfast at the Springfield Sheraton, and a collaboration with the South Hadley Children's Chorus in May. The CCS is particularly looking forward to attending the dress rehearsal of the nationally televised Martin Luther King, Jr. Tribute Concert by the Boston Children's Chorus on January 18 at New England Conservatory's Jordan Hall and taking part in a Dalcroze workshop for educators with Lisa Parker of the Longy School on April 10.

In addition to providing musical experiences for children, the CCS has a broader social mission of building community within an urban setting, helping to break down cultural barriers and stigmas. CCS is accessible to all students regardless of financial or transportation concerns. Baker and volunteer parents coordinate rides to and from rehearsals for those that need transportation. During performances, all students wear a uniform, a polo shirt with the CCS logo, eliminating class divisions and creating a feeling of uniformity – of community.

The Children's Chorus of Springfield also acts as an advocacy vehicle for music education in the Springfield Public Schools by educating parents on the importance of music in a general education curriculum. In Springfield, individual school principals decide if music and the arts will be offered in his/her school. Once parents see how

excited their child is about learning music after singing with the CCS, Baker says, the parent becomes much more motivated to talk with his/her child's principal and advocate for the arts in the school.

Baker offers the following advice for those interested in creating a community chorus in an urban setting:

“Be willing to spend a lot more time than you ever thought you would. You need to believe in the power of music to transform lives. Become willing to do whatever it takes. It will always take more time than you think it will, especially in an urban setting. You will need to educate parents on the importance of commitment – attending every rehearsal, meeting and performance is vital to singers' musical success. CCS parents also witness the power of choral singing to nurture personal growth and confidence by stressing teamwork, discipline, responsibility, and self-control.”

“Kids become aware that they are important. When we have conversations with people, they seem so happy that kids in Springfield have an opportunity to make music with their peers from other parts of the city. That's what unites us. The need is great in the urban city.”

“We [Abercrombie and Baker] just believe in this. We spend about 30 hours a week on this and we're retired! But . . . we'll keep going on it until we're not able to do it. It's huge and takes a lot of time, but it's so rewarding.”