

Singing to Remember

- Singing Hills Chorus

BY GRACE BRANDT

When the Singing Hills Chorus held its winter performance in the chapel of Mankato's Our Lady of Good Counsel on January 5, the venue was packed. Every ticket was sold and every seat was filled. People even squeezed

into the back to watch the whole performance while standing.

The concert had originally been scheduled for December 1, but an unexpected snowstorm forced the choir to reschedule. Between the original date and January 5, the group was able to fit in only one extra rehearsal, leaving some members a bit nervous about how well they would remember their songs.

"I was really concerned about that," Jan Adams remembered. She lives in Mankato and sings with the choir as a volunteer. "We had to wait until the first Saturday in January, so we hadn't sung these songs [for some time]. I was concerned, [since] a lot of our members have dementia and might not remember."

In fact, around one-third of the chorus's members have Alzheimer's or other forms of dementia. That's because the chorus was organized especially for people living with these memory-affecting conditions.

A place to belong

The Singing Hills Chorus is part of ACT on Alzheimer's, a volunteer-driven non-profit that has chapters across Minnesota.



According to Program Director Sandi Lubrant, members of the ACT group were inspired by a Twin Cities-based choir called the Giving Voice Chorus, which was created to offer people with different dementias, as well as their caregivers, a place to sing and socialize together.

"A lot of times with this disease, people focus on the loss," Lubrant said. "But there are assets and abilities that still exist, and I think it's really important to figure out how to tap into it."

Janesville native Kristin Ziemke acts as the choir's music director. Ziemke has always had a special relationship with music, ever since she started playing piano in second grade. During high school, she worked as an activities assistant at a long-term care facility, where she would carry her keyboard around to patients' rooms and play songs for them. She earned an undergraduate degree in music therapy from the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire and then worked as music therapy director at Monarch Healthcare Management in Mankato for eight years. In 2016, she opened her own music therapy private practice, Avenues Music Therapy, LLC.

"This choir has been just a God-send," she said. "I love that this choir lets me branch outside of my music therapy [background], but I get to use a lot of my music therapy skills within it."

While the first informative meeting yielded only a handful of people, by the choir's official start in September 2017, the numbers had grown. The first concert, held in December 2017, had about 26 people performing, and the numbers have grown for every session since then. The January concert had 46 participants.

Ziemke explained that the choir tries to keep a 1:1:1 ratio - one caregiver and volunteer for every singer living with dementia. In fact, she said they've actually had to stop taking volunteer sing-



How music affects our brain

According to Ziemke, music is unique in the way it affects people's brains, because it creates activity across all areas and stimulates productive cognitive processes.

"Music activates our brain in a very special way," Ziemke said. "It's an opportunity to be silly together, to dance together and to have fun. [Our choir members] are living with a disease that is constantly causing deterioration. With this choir, you can create friendships and also challenge your mind and keep it as sharp as you possibly can."

"Music is stored deeply in the brain, and so are emotions," Lubrant added. "When people can come together and experience joy and love and music for a morning, it's just something that carries over for people. [Singing Hills Chorus] is a really quality program designed for adults that helps people thrive and be surprised by what we can accomplish."

Joining the choir

WHEN: Thursdays from 10-11:30 a.m. (with social time before and after)

DURATION: January 31-May 11

WHERE: School Sisters of Notre Dame, 170 Good Counsel Drive, Mankato

COST: \$25 per person (scholarships available)

TO REGISTER: Visit singing-hillschorus.org, call 507-519-0626 or email katoaactonalz@yahoo.com. Registrations are accepted at any time if space is available. However, singers are encouraged to sign up prior to the beginning of the session.

Upcoming events

WHEN: 1:30 p.m. on May 11

WHERE: School Sisters of Notre Dame, 170 Good Counsel Drive, Mankato

COST: \$10 (kids under 5 are free but still need tickets)

For more information: www.singinhillschorus.org

"Instead of losing friends, people are making friends. We're getting to know each other's stories. We're laughing together and eating together. Alzheimer's disease often changes relationships that people have, so to be in a place that's so accepting and full of love, it's really important." - Sandy Lubrant

ers recently so that they can keep their ratio. She added that they plan to cap the choir at 50 participants to ensure it doesn't outgrow the "community" feel, though she added that they would be interested in starting a second choir if the demand is there.

"We knew it just needed time to blossom," Ziemke said. "People struggle with feeling confident enough to come experience it, but once they're in, they're in."

Year-round music

The Singing Hills Chorus divides its time between two 14-week sessions in the spring and winter, each culminating in a concert, as well as a more informal "get-together" session in the summer.

The choir's leadership team meets a few months prior to each concert to brainstorm about music and come up with a theme, with the goal of offering participants a range of music that is both enjoyable and challenging. Part of this is includ-

ing pieces that have two- or three-part harmony, as well as some songs most of the choir members are unfamiliar with. There are usually around 14 songs per concert.

But the biggest goal is to pick music that is joyful.

"We try to choose music that promotes joy," Ziemke said. "If there's one thing that I can say about the choir, it is a joy-giving experience. From the rehearsal to the music we choose, to the social time before and after, it's about creating a joyful experience that promotes friendships, that stimulates cognitive health and helps [our singers] accomplish something that maybe they thought they couldn't accomplish."

Ziemke said the choir has all levels of singers, from people who have never sung in a group to people who have years of experience. They also have all levels of dementia progression. Because of this, Ziemke and her leadership team adapt the music to everyone's individual needs, whether that's creating a CD or writing out lyric sheets.

"As the disease progresses, we're able to prog-

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ress with them and give them the modifications they need,” she said.

Rehearsals are every Thursday morning in the School Sisters of Notre Dame’s basement, with a social time before and after. Four sisters are currently singing with the choir, along with their four caregivers.

“We are so honored to be in their home,” Lubrant said. “They have just welcomed us. That’s a really beautiful relationship.”

Ziemke said, in many ways, rehearsals are just like rehearsals at any other choir; she works with members on diction, volume, breath support and other musical elements. However, she also modifies the way she directs to make it more appropriate for her members, such as doing things at a slower pace or providing moments to pause and really grasp the information.

“We’re working on the same goals as your average choir, but we may pace it a little differently,” she explained.

A place to belong

According to Ziemke, there are countless benefits to a dementia-friendly choir, but one of the biggest ones is simply offering people a chance to form new relationships in a safe space.

“We’ve seen friendships develop,” she said. “We’ve seen people say, ‘I needed to be here this week. I needed to come back because I needed the joy that it brings. I look forward to Thursday. It’s the best day of my week.’”

Cheryl Lamoureux and Kristi Kregel are a mother-daughter team who have been singing with the choir since its first season. Kregel acts as caregiver to her mother, who is in the early stages of Alzheimer’s. They said they have both found a welcoming community that accepts them for who they are and what they bring.

“There’s a sense of community and freedom in knowing if you make a mistake, it’s okay,” Kregel said. “You don’t have to worry about messing up. It feels safe here.”

“You’re accepted for what you can bring,” Lamoureux agreed. “There’s a feeling here of acceptance, love and affirmation with this group. I just love it. I look forward to this day every week.”

Adams has been volunteering with the chorus since it began. She said she has sung in choirs before and enjoyed it, but she has never enjoyed another choir as much as this one.

“When I walk in the door of our practice room, I just get this infusion of joy,” she said. “I’m bolstered all day and some of the next day when I go. There’s a big hole in my week if I can’t go.”

She explained volunteers help in many small ways, such as taking someone to the restroom if the caregiver is busy or finding someone’s place in the sheet music. But, she added, the biggest thing is just helping to “jolly them up,” which tends to go both ways once the music starts.

“They just become different people,” Adams said. “The joy that’s on their faces... money can’t buy it. It’s just been amazing to me. There’s so much joy that this choir gives to them. You have to be there. Come one time for 15 minutes, and you’ll feel it. It’s a real special place.”



Adams is quick to share how the choir has taken care of her, too - such as last winter, when members banded together to drive her to and from practice after she slipped walking on icy pavement in the parking lot. She said from then on, a fellow member always calls to schedule a ride to practice, while another member takes her home afterwards.

“To have someone make the effort for me made me feel so honored and special, that someone would care enough about me to do that for me,” she said. “It’s not a real big thing, but it is to me.”

Their best yet

When the Singing Hills Chorus began its winter concert, the audience had no clue that members hadn’t been able to practice much in the past month. Instead, each song the choir sang was clear, smooth = and joyful. The concert swung from a jolly Christmas medley to a mournful Celtic tune, with other classic songs such as “Our House,” “Stand by Me,” and “The Sound of Music.”

The joy was infectious, radiating off the chorus members and filling every person sitting in the audience. When the last note ended, it didn’t take long for people to rise for a standing ovation.

“It was the best concert we ever gave,” Adams said. “It couldn’t have been any better.”

Grace Brandt is a wandering reporter whose home base is Mankato.

The School Sisters of Notre Dame

Singing Hills Chorus is not the first time the School Sisters of Notre Dame in Mankato have worked towards supporting people living with Alzheimer’s and other dementias.

The sisters were part of a pilot study that focused on aging, started by Dr. David Snowden in the late 1980’s. By the 1990’s, the doctor had expanded his study to include Alzheimer’s disease. The “Nun Study” opened to all School Sisters of Notre Dame provinces across the U.S.,

with a 66 percent participation rate. Sisters are evaluated yearly with memory tests and physical functioning assessments, among other things, and 98 percent of participants also agreed to donate their brains after they died. The study continues today, with three living sisters who are

still enrolled.

“I’m really amazed by the contributions that the sisters have made for Alzheimer’s disease research,” Lubrant said. “For them to say yes, come be here, and open their home to us, I love the energy.”