

The Magic of Music

by Swanee Hunt, Scripps Howard News Service, August 17, 2005

Every city has its ethnic neighborhoods, but often, rather than being rich in hope, they become disconnected pockets, cut off from the benefits of urban life. With this in mind, Hubie Jones, founder of the Boston Children's Chorus, has set to work constructing a cultural bridge. He knows that the world has become more dangerous, especially for kids. There are plenty of destructive options and temptations on the city streets, even in the schools. But it's against that backdrop that this civic leader has created a showstopper.

In 2003, Jones created the Chorus, modeling it after the 47-year-old Chicago Children's Choir, which has performed from Carnegie Hall to the Ukraine. Jones' dream has grown to nearly 150 children, from grades 2-12. After a highly successful debut for a sold-out crowd of more than a thousand (with only three months of rehearsals under their belts), they performed a year later at the Democratic National Convention. It's no wonder they're receiving more singing requests than they can handle.

Like other children's choruses, the Boston group provides music education and performance experience. It also provides the building blocks every boy or girl needs: analytical, communication, leadership, and teamwork skills. With a big grin, Jonathan, a singer in the group, says, "I used to get so nervous when I stood in front of a big audience. Now, here's what the chorus has given me...confidence!"

The children learn that hard work and practice pay off. Not only can they hear the progress in their voices, they also get plenty of encouragement from the audience. Eddie, another chorister, asks with pride, "Do you know what it feels like to bring a crowd of people to their feet? It's amazing!"

Educators and parents know that youth development is fraught with difficult times, but research shows the arts can help. Kids involved in arts activities drop out of high school by sophomore year at a rate one third that of others. That's huge. And older students who take at least four years of arts classes score nearly 100 points higher on their SATs than those who take one-half year or less.

But what makes the Boston Children's Chorus especially significant is its diversity—its rich geographic, ethnic, religious, and socio-economic range. Thirty-five percent of the children are White, 31 percent Black, 16 percent Latino, 7 percent Asian, and 11 percent from mixed-racial families. The result is a multi-cultural ensemble woven into a cohesive, harmonious, and powerful singing group. "After years working in the community, I realized that the best way to bring people together over racial, ethnic, and social class divides is through the arts," says Hubie Jones.

The kids' repertoire is as diverse as the group itself. The children have performed Angolan folk songs, Quaker hymns, Hebrew spirituals, and Spanish lullabies. All the songs have a positive message, focusing on peace, overcoming obstacles, and supporting one another.

And so, through music, the Chorus is promoting social healing. This is a talented and serious chorus, and training is often intense; but there's also time for socializing. "I love the music-making," Jones says. "But what I really love is the community-making." Merely getting a diverse bunch of people into the same room does little to bridge divides. But social barriers crumble when these kids are standing side by side, sharing a folder of music, singing their hearts out.

A diverse group of performers attracts a diverse audience. The Chorus has managed to unite Boston kids, families, and civic leaders. What's magic about music? It's a natural cultural bridge. The singing voice is an intimate, personal expression, but children singing add the innocence and poignancy that brings an audience to tears.

The Chorus recently traveled outside their home base to perform at the International Children's Choral Festival in Japan. Knowing they would be living with Japanese families, before they left the children took part in cultural orientation programs, learning to eat with chopsticks without leaving a trail on their shirts, discovering a new, exotic way of bathing, and practicing other etiquette pointers for a Japanese home-stay.

At home or abroad, Hubie Jones is determined to create a "singing revolution." Watching the kids march onto the stage in their spiffy red blazers, I'd say the Boston Children's Chorus seems like as good a revolutionary force as any around.