

Start with a simple design and modify/enlarge your page as time moves on. Yahoo SiteBuilder is user friendly and allows you more freedom in designing your site.

Items to consider including on your website include: choir events calendar, choir description page, an information page with details about upcoming events, audition requirements, links to resources and recordings, downloadable documents such as your choir handbook, school permission slips, and trip itineraries.

If you aren't currently using email, Facebook, Twitter or a website with your choir, choose only one or two of these tools to begin. If you get stuck, don't despair. One or more of your students will be happy to help you.

Using the internet, another option is to do a Google search and find step-by-step instructions or forums where you can ask questions about a specific problem. Whatever you decide to use as communication tools, make sure you are committed to them so that parents and students can adjust to your new methods of communication. Happy tweeting!



Change your thoughts and you change the world.

—Harold R. Mcalindon

Oakdale Prison Community Choir:

A Person is a Person Through Other People

by

Mary Cohen, University of Iowa, Iowa City, IA

Each Tuesday at 5 p.m. during the fall and spring semesters, fifteen to twenty-five men and women travel with me to the

Iowa Medical and Classification Center (IMCC) known as Oakdale Prison in Coralville. There they join approximately twenty-five imprisoned men to form the Oakdale Community Choir.

I started the choir in 2009 after six years of studying, assisting, and directing prison choirs. Before moving to Iowa City, I assisted Elvera Voth with the East Hill Singers (EHS), a chorus of minimum security males incarcerated in Kansas at the Lansing Correctional Facility and other men from the Kansas City region (Go to www.artsinprison.org for more information on the East Hill Singers and to www.choralresearch.org for an article I wrote about a Robert Shaw sing-along that provided seed money to start Arts in Prison, Inc.).

For six months I directed a subgroup of the East Hill Singers, the Osawatomie East Hill Singers, which was comprised of men incarcerated on the grounds of the Osawatomie State Hospital known by the Kansas Department of Corrections as "Lansing South." These men were participating in a therapeutic community where they learned how to deal with substance-abuse issues.

I have completed a number of research studies about prison choirs, so after assuming my new teaching position at the University of Iowa School of Music, I inquired about forming a prison choir where I could combine research, teaching, and service. In 2008, I met with Lowell Brandt, the warden of IMCC at that time, who supported the idea of forming a combined community-prison choir.

Messages were sent to choral directors in the Iowa City area inviting interested singers to join the new choir. As of September 2010, we have had a total of 59 community people ("outside singers"), including University of Iowa students, faculty, staff, and individuals from the region, plus 51 men in the general population of IMCC ("inside singers") participate in this unique choir.

We usually have an equal number of "outside" and "inside" singers during a season, 22-28, although this fall we have been inundated with community members who want to participate. I am working with the prison administration to create a rotating schedule of community participants so that our numbers do not overwhelm staff and security. Warden Daniel Craig and his administration have been very supportive of this program, and we are grateful for their partnership.

All participants voluntarily sing in the choir unless they are enrolled in one of the graduate classes I teach. These students are required to sing in the choir as a service/learning component within the course.

Many students, outside singers, had misperceptions about prisoners and the criminal justice system. One wrote: "When I first started the project, I was not thrilled about singing in a prison choir; I thought the prisoners were going to be rough looking and not very friendly. I expected them to be in shackles and not interested in singing. I quickly learned that they were human beings, had feelings, and wanted to sing."

I co-taught an undergraduate course on human rights. Those students were required to attend a rehearsal or concert. In their reflections, nearly all noted that they learned that prisoners were people, too. It seems that television shows and movies tend to give the public a mistaken view of people in prison.

The Oakdale Community Chorus performs two concerts in the prison gym at the culmination of the choral season. The first concert is for other prisoners at IMCC and a few guests. The second concert is for outside guests including choir members' families. During the concerts, a few singers read written reflections about the songs' texts and the theme of the concert. A writing component is included in this project, a feature designed to help build camaraderie, deepen thinking about the choral singing process, and provide a communication channel between choristers and me, the director. Introductions for the various works are drawn from the written reflections.

Our concert themes have included Peace and Place (spring 2009), Rivers and Rocks (summer 2009), Light in the Darkness (winter 2009), and More Love (spring 2010). We record each performance and send CDs to family members of the men in the prison.

Upcoming concerts are scheduled for Tuesday, December 7, and Wednesday, December 15. A limited number of "outside" audience members may attend these performances. If you are interested in attending, contact me at mary-cohen@uiowa.edu.

People who participate in music-in-prison programs derive multiple benefits from their experience. As you know from working with choirs, in order for an ensemble to succeed, chorus members must subsume individual wants and desires and

work for the good of the entire group. This process helps participants develop a sense of group responsibility, an important skill for everyone to hone, particularly for people behind bars.

One community participant wrote, "In four-part harmony, there is a process like weaving or DNA twisting as the strands of soprano, alto, tenor, and bass intertwine; the parts sung together are more beautiful and stronger than on their own." The coming together of both "outside" and "inside" singers is powerful as we move through the process of creating beautiful choral music during each semester.

In addition to rehearsing and performing choral arrangements, I have also facilitated songwriting with choir members. To date, we have performed five original songs. This past summer, I offered a songwriting workshop for men in the prison. These opportunities for self-expression give participants a sense of ownership in the choir and help build self-esteem through worthiness and competence.

According to one of the men in prison, "Since joining the choir, I've noticed more self confidence around other people. At first I was scared, thinking I might not be good enough or maybe others would look down on me. I was greeted by the volunteers with grace and kindness." Another wrote: "I feel more confident about myself. My self-esteem is much higher. I feel more important in knowing that there are people on the outside of prison that care about me."

Two other prisoners have written about how the choir has helped them: "Since the formation of this choir, I've noticed numerous changes within myself in various areas. I was all about myself and didn't care much about others. The choir, through bringing me to a happier, well-adjusted place in my own thought, changed that." Another stated: "I believe that being part of this choir, being a small part of something bigger than ourselves, something outside of ourselves and seeing the example of people who live outside of themselves can wake more of us up. . . . to who we have been and who we can be."

In general, prison populations are hidden communities in our society. One perception is that when someone has committed a crime, he or she should be "locked up" and "do time" without the outside community thinking critically about societal or personal factors that contributed to the criminal's behavior.

One of the reasons I initiated a combined prisoner-

volunteer choir was to increase awareness of the problems facing our criminal justice system and to think more creatively, productively, and humanely about how to improve it.

Rehabilitation does not happen on its own. An underlying foundational concept within this Oakdale choir; "Ubuntu" (see Fisher; 2006/07), means that a person is a person through other people. When people join together for choral singing, whether inside or outside a prison, participants develop human and musical relationships created in rehearsals and performances that affect their identities in a positive manner.

Best wishes to each of you as you provide meaningful opportunities for those people lucky enough to sing and grow as people in your ensembles.

Helpful Resources

- A recent issue of the International Journal of Community Music focused on criminal justice and music. *International Journal of Community Music* (2010). 3(1). doi: 10.1386/ijcm.3.1.3/2.
- Vivien Stern wrote a simple-to-read book that covers the challenges of incarceration and crime: Stern, V. (2006). *Creating Criminals: Prisons and People in a Market Society*. New York, NY: Zed Books.
- Cohen, M. L. (2008). "Mother Theresa, How Can I Help You? The Story of Elvera Voth, Robert Shaw, and the Bethel College Benefit Sing-Along for Arts in Prison, Inc." *International Journal of Research in Choral Singing* 3(1), 4-22. See www.choralresearch.org
- Fisher, S. (2006/07). Why we need choral music—Ubuntu. *The Voice of Chorus America*, p. 40.



Success isn't permanent, and failure isn't fatal.

—Mike Ditka

Dynamic (and Effective) Teaching with Junior High/Middle School Singers

by

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- Talk little, sing much.
- Focus on the three E's: eyes, energy and emotion. "Where the eyes are, the brain is."
- Avoid working just for correct notes with singers. Become a master at identifying problems and then determining the most efficient way to solve them.
- Use the Socratic method. Ask questions requiring one word or short answers, e. g., Does that note go up, down, or stay the same? Then ask a specific student (not the entire group) for the answer. Keep the pace moving quickly and the students engaged.
- Lead students to make musical decisions. Don't tell students what they can discover for themselves.
- Work from what is good and positive to what needs correction. Always end with success.
- Avoid asking questions like "Do you want to sing?" unless it really doesn't matter to you.
- As much as possible, work with ALL sections of the choir. Address the entire class, not just one section, as you teach.