



What Makes a Choir a Choir?

By Billy Talley, President

My school district has made a strong push this year to improve our students' writing skills. Even in the choir room, we are expected to have our students do some kind of writing assignment each six weeks. At Christmas, each student wrote a Christmas poem. We've listened to recordings of orchestral music and wrote what the music made us feel. But this past six weeks, I posed a simple question that each student had to answer: What makes a choir a choir? Their answer could be a single word or a paragraph written on a 3 x 5 index card. I was encouraged by many of the responses. Some of the more common answers were words and phrases like family, community, cooperation, team effort, common goal, personal sacrifice, trust, passion, love for music, and friendship. There were other phrases like "encourage one another", "make something beautiful", "for the greater good", "expressing beauty through song", and "make an impact." My favorite answer came from a sophomore tenor who said *"A choir is a group of people who may start out as strangers but end up becoming a close-knit family. I think singing might be involved too!"*

If I had posed this question early in the school year, I am sure the answers would have been quite different. But I was proud that so many of my singers could see what was truly important about choir: family, friendships, community. How do we as choral directors create an atmosphere in our choir rooms where our singers truly feel they are part of a family and want to work for the "greater good"? It starts with quality music and varied performances. But another aspect that is just as important as singing together would be the non-music activities you create for your singers. For me, that usually involves some kind of physical activity. Let's face it: most of our students are not exactly the athletic type and do everything they can to avoid sports events. But if they can participate in a softball game with their choir friends, a camaraderie is developed that will reap huge benefits when the choir is back on the risers. I have used softball, bowling, and sand volleyball tournaments as non-music activities. This year, I've added a Friday Fun Day a couple of times each month where the student leaders decide a group activity for the rehearsal time. It gets a little crazy sometimes. It gets loud. It can move to the brink of chaos. But it helps the students to know each other better. In the long

run, it is worth losing one day of rehearsal if we become a more cohesive choir as a result.

As you evaluate what worked this year and what didn't work, think about ways to build that sense of family within your choirs. Once a month, plan an activity that has nothing to do with music. Encourage everyone to be there. Have your officers and section leaders on board to encourage the other choir members to show up. Make every activity FUN and non-judgmental. And take lots of pictures to put up in the choir room or on the banquet video. Don't be afraid to participate with the students. They love to see their director in a vulnerable position. During last year's softball game, one of my guys ran over me at home plate. Nothing was broken, but a lasting memory was created! At this year's choir volleyball tournament, our cluster choir directors formed a team and actually won a game! And yes, there was some trash talking.

We will always have the music as a common bond. But we can also deepen the relationships among our singers by "thinking outside the choir room." Maybe an overnight retreat would work well for your group. I recently saw on Facebook where all the girls in a choir were having a special luncheon or tea on a Saturday. What a great idea! Be creative in thinking of ways to include everyone in your activities. Create opportunities for your choir members to become a close-knit family. And don't forget that "singing might be involved too!"