



Big Ears, Bigger Heart

by Robin Brockway-Nichols, VP High School

I am a very lucky woman. Sometimes people ask me to work with their choirs, and sometimes I get to travel a bit and judge a UIL Contest or a festival. That alone is a GIANT blessing, but the most fulfilling aspect is meeting other choral directors and hearing their stories. As you know, our state is full to the brim with amazing choral programs – aren't we lucky – and no two are exactly alike. But I've discovered we all share some remarkably similar challenges. I'd say highest on the list is probably frustration with the physical demands of the job.

Think about those days you arrive at 6:00 am, turn off the school alarm, and start the day with a giant cup of coffee and three hours in front of the computer...then teach five, six, or seven choirs while standing hunched over a piano (conducting with one hand while writing a nurse pass, playing the tenor part, and eating your lunch with the other). Or perhaps you teach all day, set up for a concert, conduct the concert wearing three-inch heels, strike the stage after the concert...do I need to go on? Even an "ordinary" twelve hour day of teaching and working at the computer exacts a physical price. As a veteran of multiple neck and back procedures I can speak to this subject at length: get yourself a tall chair and USE IT. It is not a sign of weakness to sit when your body says "STOP". I've also found gentle morning stretches and "Yoga for Beginners" to be extremely helpful. I probably look hilarious rolling around in my den at 5:30 am, but only the dog knows for sure. On the rare days you are able to leave school right when the bell rings, leave whatever needs doing undone and walk out the door. Avoid working at home and instead focus on your family and friends. Sometimes a good dose of laughter with a loved one is more refreshing than eight hours of sleep!

Everything I've written so far also speaks to the eternal challenge of achieving that mysterious thing called "balance". Has anyone in our profession truly mastered the art of balance? Caring enough but not obsessing about our students, choral programs, and careers is tricky. I admire those folks who are able to seamlessly manage it all and appear to be mostly sane (let's face it – none of us are truly sane or we wouldn't love this job so much!). We've assembled some pretty impressive folks to talk to us about balance at this summer's convention – **Jannifer and Jeff Rice, Kim and Chris Ahrens, and Sarah and Doug Council**. I am so looking forward to their "Modern Family" workshop. Bring your questions, comments, stories, and ideas to this round-table discussion. No doubt we'll need more than an hour for this session and will be forced to re-convene later for a beverage and more conversation!

A sense of isolation is another huge hurdle many of us face. Those who have been teaching quite a while – I refuse to call us "old" – have developed a network of trusted choir friends. That network was developed through personal interaction, most of which took place via phone or in person. My internal introvert has fought this battle for years. If forced with a choice, I'd rather email or text. But that choice does not foster relationships. And without relationships we cannot survive for long in this business. You will be amazed at the outpouring of empathy and inspiration you receive simply by reaching out to someone whose opinion you respect. On the opposite side of that coin, take a minute to encourage a new teacher. We all know one...invite them out for coffee or a beverage, and simply listen. Encourage them to attend our summer convention and make some new connections. Offer advice when asked, but listen with big ears and a bigger heart. By doing so, you are securing the future and you might even get that extra boost desperately needed to finish off this crazy school year. Can't wait to see you in San Antonio!