

Local choir brings hopes and community for those experiencing memory loss

Allison Skarda Leader-Telegram Staff

November 8, 2024

EAU CLAIRE— Every Thursday morning, nearly 80 people arrive at the church off of Cedar Street for choir rehearsal, clutching purple binders filled with sheet music. It takes something special to draw such a crowd and that's precisely what Stand in the Light Memory Choir is — a choir specifically for those affected by memory loss.

“Music sparks something very deep in memory and you see people really come alive during rehearsal,” said the choir’s administrative assistant Kobi Shaw. “That spark, you can see it in their eyes, you can see it in their body language, you can see it in the way they open up.”

About one-third of the choir is currently diagnosed with memory loss, Shaw said. Another third are singing partners who are paired up to assist members experiencing memory loss, with the remaining being volunteer singers. But as the music starts, the metaphorical lines between the groups begin to disappear.

“The first time people watch the choir, they try to see who has memory loss and who doesn’t,” Shaw said. “But you can’t. That’s the beauty of it.”

Rehearsal begins as it always does with some stretches and the group’s rendition of “The 59th Street Bridge Song (Feelin’ Groovy)” by Simon & Garfunkel. Since the routine has remained unchanged for nearly eight years, the co-director Cathy Reitz encourages members to try singing without consulting the lyrics. Some of the members seem apprehensive at the idea, but after a few lines something shifts and people begin to sing more freely.

Reitz helped found the choir in 2016, the same year her sister passed away from dementia. As a music educator for over three decades, Reitz has long known the power of sharing music, but it wasn’t until caring for her sister that she saw how particularly healing music could be for those dealing with memory loss. Shortly after her sister passed, someone suggested she start a choir for people with dementia.

As she got her hair done one day, Reitz told her stylist about the idea of starting such a group. Across the salon, Eileen Rowell listened with

excitement. Her husband, Denny, had dementia and loved to sing. He sang everywhere. The day the doctor told them there was nothing else they could do for him other than provide comfort care, Denny sang the whole car ride home.

Rowell asked her hairdresser for Reitz' phone number and called her as soon as she got home. She told Reitz how important the choir would be to her husband and so many others. Shortly after that call, the choir was formed with Denny and Eileen Rowell among its first members. It immediately became clear how impactful the choir was for people experiencing memory loss and their loved ones.

"I just knew that we had to continue something like that," Reitz said. "To see it happen every week is amazing because people come in kind of shuffling and closed off, but then music is their lifeline."

Since then, the choir has grown from just 16 members to 79. With the choir's growth, some people have suggested limiting the number of "ringer" singers, but Reitz is adamant about their importance.

"A community has all kinds of people, and that's what we're creating. It's a safe place for someone with memory loss who can't really sing all the words, but they can still be just surrounded by music," Reitz said. "Imagine if you've always been in a choir and you reach this point where suddenly you can't

anymore. This is an opportunity to get immersed in music without fear or worry.”

Although her husband has since passed away, Rowell has stayed in the choir as a ringer singer. She doesn't consider herself much of a singer, but the choir is a healing place and somewhere she can help other caregivers using her ten years of experience taking care of her husband.

“I don't come here to sing. I come here to get my music fix for the day,” she said. “Once I leave here, I am changed.”

Recently, Rowell wrote a poem about the joy one gets sharing music brings to the world. Sharing and singing were two of her husband's favorite things. A salesman by trade, every time he went on the road gave the people he met a piece of candy. That way they were friends, not customers.

It's a custom he brought to the choir as well, handing out candy as he talked with people, Reitz said. Rowell would follow close behind, warning people not to eat as the age and origin of the candy was always rather suspicious.

The choir commissioned a composer to put Rowell's poem to music and will sing the piece at their end of season concerts. Also performed at the concert will be the choir's namesake “Stand In The Light,” which is sung at the end of every rehearsal and performance.

It's during this song that the healing power of the choir comes into full focus. Choir members who had been seated all rehearsal stood up, holding onto their singing partners for support. Even members who had struggled through previous songs, sing each word with conviction.

The beautiful thing about the choir isn't just the music, although the connection between music and memory is fascinating, Reitz said. The group gives people with memory loss a place where they don't have to be afraid or embarrassed. It doesn't matter if they forget the words or say something wrong; everyone there understands.

Performances and getting involved

To close out the season, the choir will have three performances open to the public. The first is this Sunday, November 10 at the Heyde Center for the Arts in Chippewa Falls at 2 p.m. It is a combined concert with the Chippewa Falls High School and tickets are free, although donations are appreciated.

On Thursday, November 21, the choir has two concerts at Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd in Eau Claire. The first performance begins at 10 a.m. and, although it is technically a dress rehearsal, it is open to the public. The second concert begins at 6:30 p.m. There is a \$15 suggested donation for both performances.

Rehearsals for the choir's spring season begins on January 9. As in the past, rehearsals will take place from 9:45-11 a.m. on Thursdays at Lutheran Church

of the Good Shepherd in Eau Claire. Pre-rehearsal social and coffee time begins at 9:15 a.m.

Anyone interested in getting involved is encouraged to show up for the first rehearsal of the season. There is no audition process to join the choir; people simply need to register to join. If someone would like a singing partner to help them with the music, they can request one during registration or bring their own caregiver to help.

Starting next season Kate Larson, who is currently serving as a co-director, will take over the choir from Reitz. Reitz doesn't plan on leaving the choir, but rather she is merely taking another role.

"I'm going to be the person who hands out cookies and screws around during rehearsal," Reitz said. "I just want to make sure everyone is having fun."

Additionally, the choir will host holiday sing-alongs on December 5 and 12. As with regular rehearsals these run from 9:45-11 a.m. at Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd. These sing-alongs are a great way to learn more about the choir for anyone interested in joining.

For more information about the choir and how to get involved please visit standinthelightmemorychoir.org or facebook.com/sitlchoir.