

**Personal Reflections by Founder Paul Petrella**  
**One Voice Mixed Chorus 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary**  
**March 14, 2008**

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**INSPIRATION**

Music plays a very special role in our world. It helps us to wade through our emotions, connect with the divine, get through difficult times, embrace good memories. It also brings us together with others—even breaking through to those who might think very differently than we do to find common ground. Words hold meaning, but words make an even greater impact when delivered with music. A song can reach into your heart in a way that a political speech or conversation cannot.

In the mid-1980s, as I was in the early stages of coming out as a gay man, I noticed that gay men and lesbian women stayed mostly separate, and there seemed to be few opportunities to find common ground and understand each other better. I believed then, as I do now, that we could not make significant strides towards human rights for GLBT people unless we worked together.

These realizations inspired me to create One Voice Mixed Chorus.

**THE EARLY YEARS**

In 1986 I was singing with the Twin Cities Men's Chorus (they added "Gay" to their name some years later) and participated in the GALA Choruses Festival II, held in Minneapolis. This festival featured gay and lesbian choruses from all around the country. 17 choruses participated, almost all of them men's choruses. In fact, the only "mixed" chorus (women and men singing together) was from California, and they participated with only 16 singers. Witnessing this further verified my concerns about the separateness between women and men in the gay and lesbian community.

I spent much of 1987 in reflection about these issues and began envisioning the possibility of starting a gay and lesbian chorus in the Twin Cities. Friends agreed that our community would be a prime location – given the increasing size of our gay and lesbian community and also the strength of the choral tradition in Minnesota. Participating in the gay and lesbian march on Washington DC in 1987 provided me with additional inspiration. If we could make such a tremendous impact by gathering together for a national event of that magnitude, I felt that we could make additional impact in our home cities by working together to increase our visibility. What better way than with a chorus?

In December of 1987, I decided it was time to act. I placed a classified ad in Equal Time (a GL newspaper), proposing the chorus idea and asking that interested persons contact me. A handful of people called me. Interestingly, a number of the people who called were actually not singers. They simply liked the idea of this kind of organization. In February 1988 I convened a meeting at Annie's Parlor in Uptown, inviting those who had

responded to the ad, as well as some friends and colleagues who expressed interest. As I recall there were about 7 or 8 of us at the meeting. Plans started taking off from there, and evolved fairly quickly. In the summer of 1988, there was agreement to move forward.

Our small committee began to discuss the logistics of getting the chorus off the ground. I sought some training at Resources & Counseling for the Arts, to make sure we followed the proper procedure for incorporating a non-profit arts organization. We conducted a small contest to get ideas for naming the chorus and for a logo. After much discussion, we selected the name One Voice Mixed Chorus. In the summer three of us incorporated the organization: myself as board President, a business colleague of mine Ed Bartholic as Treasurer, and my good friend Allen McCormack as Secretary. Then we advertised to find our first Music Director, conducted interviews, and hired Cindy Brickson for the position. My friend Darcy Spears, who had her own production company Sunwalk Productions soon also joined the board. Auditions were held and rehearsals began in the fall of 1988, and our premier concert with 38 singers was held March 4, 1989 at the Janet Wallace Fine Arts Center, Macalester College in St. Paul.

I served as board Chair for the first three years, establishing the infrastructure of the organization, working to develop our board, singers, volunteers, audience, and donor base. Some highlights included launching our very first fundraising campaign with the help of a consultant and performer Lori Dokken as the spokesperson (The “One For All-All for One Voice” campaign). I employed and worked with performer Ann Reed on our very first choral commission (Ann’s first as well). This started a long-time association with Ann that continued for years into the future.

In the summer of 1990 we held a board retreat at a remote cabin, in order to do some serious planning. This was a pivotal time for the organization, as we had already grown to about 55 singers, and needed a better sense of direction for the future. I guided the board through a process to create a mission statement for the chorus. The statement we created read: ***“One Voice Mixed Chorus strives to celebrate and emancipate our gay/lesbian culture through music. By raising our voices in song, we empower ourselves and others, embracing the richness and diversity of humanity. Our mission is to encourage individual growth and initiate social change.”***

In late 1991, in much need of a break, my (first) planned retirement from the board came to pass. Fortunately, I had done succession planning and there was a board member ready to take my place as Chair. I continued to sing, but in 1993 moved out of state for a brief period, on a career move that took me to Lincoln, Nebraska. After I returned to the Twin Cities, through the later 1990s, I continued to support the chorus as a donor, audience member, selling program advertising, and ushering.

## THE NEW MILLENIUM

In 2002 I returned to singing in the chorus, and since then have served as Membership committee rep, chair of a rehearsal space selection task force, Marketing Co-chair, Personnel liaison to the board, Development committee member, and (once again) Co-chair of the Board of Directors.

During my most recent term as board Co-chair, I helped to move forward efforts to open our very first office, which came to fruition fall 2007. We also adopted and launched a fundraising system that brought long-term gift pledges to the organization for the first time. In 2006, we began a 5-year strategic planning process and staff restructuring, which was finalized in 2007. These were intense collaborations among the board co-chairs, staff and key volunteers. I was fortunate to enjoy outstanding leadership partnerships with board Co-chairs Colleen Watson and Earl Moore, who were both instrumental in the success of these efforts.

It is incredibly gratifying to see the organization grow with the leadership of so many talented singers, volunteers and staff. There has been a gradual and constant increase in professionalism in terms of singing and organizational management. Artistic & Executive Director, Jane Ramseyer Miller, who has been with the organization for over 12 years, has made a tremendous impact in making that progress happen, and she has my admiration and thanks for her contributions.

The roster of singers has grown to about 90. It is rewarding to see so many people embrace opportunities to work together toward the common good through singing. Our musical selections are also a great source of pride for me. Not only do we entertain with a wide variety of genres in our performances, but we sing music intended to communicate important messages. In my original thoughts about the group, this was high on my priority list. There's plenty of entertainment out there – communicating a social justice message within the music brings the artistic endeavor to a higher level.

One Voice has become an organization where people of any sexual/gender orientation or presentation can feel at home. I see this comfort week after week in rehearsals – an exceptionally rare and safe environment where people can feel comfortable being exactly who they are. In the 1990s, the organization made a decision to change our marketing and public identity to more explicitly and accurately reflect our inclusion of the bisexual and transgender people (*The Twin Cities' GLBT Community Chorus*). In 2007, we changed our identity once more, to explicitly express our inclusion of allies. Coupled with our newer mission statement, which was refined in 2002, One Voice Mixed Chorus is presented as *Minnesota's GLBTA chorus -- Building community and creating social change by raising our voices in song*. This outward expression of unity makes our impact even greater, and the more concise mission statement is easier for people to remember. This has enabled us to articulate ourselves to the public much more effectively. I have great pride in our inclusion and clear expression of that inclusion to the public -- inclusion that you can see clearly demonstrated in the membership of the chorus.

From the very beginning, I promoted the concept of acknowledging “associate members”. These are volunteers who support us in ways other than singing, who also have ownership in the organization. In addition to the 38 singers listed in our first concert program, we also acknowledged 8 associate members, and 4 board members who were not singers in the chorus. Over the years, this corps of volunteers has grown to about 40, and is now known as our “5<sup>th</sup> Section”. I have always felt it very important to acknowledge and thank people for their contributions of time and energy, and I’m so gratified that idea has endured.

### **IMPACT ON SOCIETY**

One Voice performs in a wide variety of venues, including churches, schools, celebrations, eldercare facilities, and sports events. We reach approximately 10,000 people in our audiences each year. With every performance, we increase acceptance of GLBT people in our society. We also build our relationships within the GLBTA community as we rehearse each week and work together on committees of the chorus.

Our commitment to outreach has increased in recent years, which is tremendously rewarding. With a greater number of singers, staff and volunteers, we have the infrastructure to better support those activities. This outreach emphasizes schools and churches, especially in communities **outside** of the Twin Cities, where acceptance of GLBT people is less prominent. This allows us to bring about even more positive social change.

Performing in schools is particularly rewarding. Though some students indicate they are uncomfortable at first, once they hear our music, they are inspired. We have also collaborated with several high school choirs. As the students get to know our chorus members, they realize we are not tremendously different from straight people. These experiences shatter stereotypes and vanquish homophobia in society.

Every fall we take a chorus “tour” over a long weekend, and generally perform in smaller communities. One performance where I remember the impact very vividly was at a UCC church in New Ulm. We performed at the Sunday morning service for this predominantly elderly congregation. One of the songs, “We Come From Good People,” spoke of the pain of rejection by family. The song makes a point to say that there are people, like those of us singing, who will accept you for who you are, who can be your chosen family. The response from the congregants was palpable – there wasn’t a dry eye in the house, and that extended even to the chorus members. The experience at this church, who were struggling with GLBT issues, showed us how powerful our singing can be, and embraced us with their tears of understanding.

### **LEGACY**

On a more personal note, I have lost count of the times that a chorus member or concert attendee has approached me, saying “thank you” for starting the chorus. It always warms my heart to know that I have contributed to the happiness of others.

In 2008, One Voice Mixed Chorus celebrates its 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary, and we continue to sing for social justice, providing a legacy that will live on for years to come. ¥