

It Starts with a Dream!

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It starts with a Dream!

“I have a dream. . .” - Martin Luther King Jr.

“There was a dream that was Rome, it shall be realized.” - Maximus - from the motion picture *Gladiator*

I was hired as the Cane Bay High School Choir director in the Spring of 2008. As you can imagine, I was incredibly excited about the opportunity to open a new school! We would have taken 3 - 5 years to build a program. . . I set out to do it in 2! I figured that since we were starting from scratch there wouldn't be the usual transition from “Mr/Mrs So-in-So used to do it this way. . .” I was wrong. . .very wrong.

One summer night about a month before school started I drove out to the school. The campus was pitch black as the security lights hadn't been fully installed, and a bright moon lit the grounds of the campus. It was a warm, foggy summer night and I was the only person on campus. Aside from the occasional car passing, it was almost silent, and very still. I drove up to the outside of our choir room where there is a window into our room. I stood looking into the room, and I dreamed.

I imagined the students that would come through that door in the coming months and years. The parents who I would get the privilege to work with. The performances we would create together, and the opportunities that lied ahead that we could only dream about at that time. The colleagues who would become a support system for me (and I for them) when we needed each other most.

I dreamed about the legacy we would leave behind for others to follow. I dreamed about 100 years from then, when Cane Bay High school was no longer the beautiful, new, shiny campus, but rather, the elder statesman of the district, probably on it's way out of commission. I dreamed about what those choir members might believe in, and hoped that they would carry on the traditions that we laid down for them.

I dreamed, BIG! About performing music of the highest level. About having fun performing together, and building a community. I dreamed about performing on State, Regional, and National Conferences. About making a name for ourselves in our State and across the country. About building something that our students would be proud of 10/15/30 years down the road. About inspiring our students to go harder, longer, farther than they ever thought they could to see if we could create music that would move us to tears and change us as humans.

As I stood there dreaming, my mind racing through the possibilities, I began to cry at the overwhelming emotion of the moment. To this day, the memory of that moment makes me emotional. It was an incredible moment of excitement, fear, anxiety, wonder, joy, happiness, enthusiasm, self-doubt, bravado, and love all wrapped in one. This is where our program started. It was a dream, a vision, a goal.

At that time, I had NO IDEA, just how difficult achieving this dream would be. I couldn't know, and, to be honest, there were many times when I thought the dream would NEVER be a reality. There were many times when I wanted to quit, give-up, move jobs for “greener pastures”. There were many times when I thought in private moments that the dream could never become reality because of hurdles in our way; unmotivated students, disengaged parents, lack of administrative support, lack of resources, my own personal shortcomings, etc. The dream was like the flame of a candle, and there were many times when it was almost blown out.

On the first day of school, with our first rehearsal of what would become the Cobra Chorale, I shared my dream of what we could become with them. I told them how we wanted to build a choral tradition there that

would be mentioned in the same breath as the best choirs around our State and the Country. I spoke about this dream as if it were a predetermined reality. Not “if we work really hard we might be able to do this”, but rather “if we work really hard we WILL be able to do this”. I laid out this vision to a group of forty-three 9th and 10th grade students, who did not see the same thing that I did!

Most of our freshmen singers had a teacher their 6th grade year who’s idea of choir was to sing along to the latest rap/hip hop song and dance. They were replaced after that year with a trumpet player who had never taught chorus before. This teacher did the best they could, but lacked the knowledge and skills to truly prepare these students to continue singing.

Our Sophomores weren’t much better. They were used to doing mostly pop and show tunes, and learning everything by listening to accompaniment CDs and picking out the parts, whatever part they could. Then, they had one year at Stratford High School with Mr. Josh Radecke, a tremendously gifted and talented director who taught them solfege, sang quality rep, made them believe in the value of music literacy, and gave them a great foundation. Then they came to me, their 4th choir director in 4 years.

Needless to say there were trust issues, and they didn’t believe in my “stupid dream”. One day in rehearsal I stopped the choir and said, “You aren’t doing the things I am asking you to do in the music! We keep making the same mistakes over and over, and they are easy things to fix guys! Do you not trust that I know what I am talking about? What’s going on?” One brave girl spoke up and said “Well, you aren’t going to be here next year anyways, so why does it matter?!” I stopped again and said “Everyone look at me. I am going to be here next year, and the year after that, and the year after that. I’m not going anywhere. My dream for the choir is to become one of the best in the State and the Country, and that’s not going to happen overnight. But, what we are doing RIGHT NOW is a part of that process, and we need to trust each other if we are going to get there.” That was a major turning point in the development of our choir.

I encourage you to take some time this semester to dream BIG! Then, share your dream with your choirs! Involve them in the process! Sit down with them and have dreaming sessions about performances that they would like to put together. You don’t have to do everything they suggest, just like they will not give their all to everything you put in front of them, however, give them ownership and build that trust. It’s the only way you can really build a firm foundation to build upon. This isn’t MY choir or THEIR choir, it’s OUR choir, and we have to build it TOGETHER!

Talking about our dreams with our students helps them understand that we are invested in their success! We are there to help them achieve great things if they are willing to go after it together. It also models a great successful life skill for them. Encourage them to dream about their futures, and work toward their personal life goals. And once you all have a common goal, and a common dream, then you are well on your way to building a GREAT choral program.

One great way to dream and motivate yourself is by attending conferences! I hope to see you all in Louisville, KY on February 21 - 24 for the Southern Region Conference! South Carolina will be represented by the Taylor Festival Choir led by our Community Choirs Chairperson Dr. Robert Taylor, and the Canterbury Choir from St. Philips Episcopal Church in Charleston. Also, we hope you will join us for "Sing Carolina" July 14th at Bob Jones University for Summer reading (dreaming) sessions and workshops. Also, our Fall Conference will be October 5 - 6 at the College of Charleston and St. Matthew's Lutheran Church. We hope to see you all there!

Dream on!

ChorTransform: ACDA's Service-Learning Initiative Investing in Transformative Music Education

My first job as a choral director at the secondary level was in rural north Florida, in a district with one high school and one middle school. There were no school choirs to speak of; I was starting the programs at both schools at once. In a place where the surrounding districts had outstanding choral music (one of which was my alma mater), and one of the finest university music schools in the country (also my alma mater), this district was a pocket of isolation. The district office approved a choral position so the "band directors would be freed up to concentrate on marching band," rather than have a token choral class. I came in, tossed all the word sheets with pop song lyrics in the trash, and began learning how to advocate and build a choral program from scratch.

One of the challenges of training pre-service choral music educators is preparing them for settings that are outside their previous experience. Many of the undergraduate students in music education are products of well-resourced, successful programs that have been developed over time by highly effective teachers. They emerge from these high school choral programs inspired and motivated to make great music in the tradition they have experienced. The next phase of their education is often characterized by more fine music making, perhaps in the auditioned choir, and the schools where they complete practicums and student teaching are, in many cases, similar to the excellent programs where they first discovered their love of choral music.

Then, they graduate and get their first job, and their new educational setting may not bear much resemblance to their earlier experiences. New teachers may find themselves in programs that are vastly different in terms of resources, tradition, administrative support, socio-economic makeup, and/or culture. Overwhelmed by the discrepancy between what they expected to encounter and the sometimes difficult realities, they often quickly move on to perceived "greener pastures," or in some cases, other professions.

As supervisor of secondary choral music education majors at USC, I was searching for ways to more effectively prepare our students for their first job, no matter the challenges. Service-learning, with its focus on reciprocity between the academy and the community partner -- the local school in this case -- was a natural fit for what I hoped to accomplish. Further important hallmarks of service-learning are: high quality service, long-term effects on the community partner, and the ability to be flexible. These are all attributes I wanted to cultivate in our students, but I needed the right vehicle to introduce it into our curriculum.

In June 2016, the ACDA National Board met in Salt Lake City. We heard a report from Kevin Lynch, consultant to ACDA earlier in the year. He recommended that ACDA turn its focus outward more, and suggested that the college/university professor, student chapters, and local schools should partner together in some way to impact communities through choral music. I went to ACDA Executive Director Tim Sharp and said, "This is service-learning. Let me work on this." He agreed, we discussed it with the Board, and during the 2016-17 academic year, ChorTransform was developed and piloted at USC.

What is ChorTransform?

ChorTransform is a service-learning initiative that partners ACDA student chapters with local secondary choral directors. It takes the form of a practicum in which student chapter members volunteer to go into local school choral programs to work with the partner choral director. They may participate in any number of activities while there, including singing

with the choir members, leading warm-ups, sectionals, or conducting rehearsals, as they might do in the context of a choral methods class. The early focus of this practicum, though, is on the relationship with the partner choral director, and how that teacher has built, or is in the process of building, a strong choral program. Student chapter members interview the partner director, and both are asked to reflect on aspects of the educational setting that go beyond rehearsal techniques and lesson planning. Some of the questions are: How did you obtain appropriate curriculum resources? How do you address the needs of students who are underserved? What were the biggest hurdles in your first three years? What are effective ways to relate to students who are different from me?

One of the potential benefits of this is the mentoring relationship that can develop between student chapter members and partner directors. Additionally, the practicum can be configured for two student chapter members to visit schools together, so that freshmen and sophomores pair up with juniors and seniors, who likely have more experience and coursework preparation. This can foster peer mentoring between undergraduates in the choral program. Student chapter members write reflections about their visits and meet together once a month in a focus group.

What are the Benefits of ChorTransform?

The primary goal of this initiative is to better equip young choral directors for the early years of their career, so that they will have confidence in their ability to be transformative in any setting. A further goal is fostering partnerships between the college/university and local schools, as well as mentoring relationships between pre-service and in-service music educators.

Ultimately, even as we understand the ability of music education to transform lives, we also recognize that transformative leadership over time is necessary to see this occur on a large scale. ChorTransform is designed to facilitate positive impact on individual students over time by addressing the needs of early career music educators.

How can I participate in ChorTransform?

ACDA has made the ChorTransform Toolkit available to student chapters nationwide. Local school programs can partner with participating student chapters to build the initiative in their settings. The Toolkit includes templates with information for student chapter members, partner choral directors, and administrators, as well as a guide for implementation. There is a great deal of flexibility in the initiative, so that any size student chapter can tailor the program to their needs.

ACDA Student Chapters should contact Sundra Flansburg at the national ACDA office (sflansburg@acda.org) to obtain the ChorTransform Toolkit. It is free and can be sent in hard copy or as a PDF. ACDA members in secondary schools who are interested in participating may check with the nearest college/university student chapter.

Currently, I am developing a "satellite" aspect of ChorTransform to include schools too far away from participating student chapters. If you are interested, please contact me at: awalker@mozart.sc.edu. A good wifi connection will be necessary for this aspect of the initiative.

If you have further questions, please feel free to email me. Also, I will be presenting an interest session about ChorTransform at the Southern Region ACDA Conference in Louisville, KY, on Feb. 24th.

I would like to express my gratitude to the following partner choral directors who agreed to pilot ChorTransform in 2016-17:

Robert Arcovio
Kristin Claiborne
Craig Coelho
Walter Graham
Katie Leitner
Christopher Leysath
Ashlee Poole
Frank Turner

Choral Elitism – It's Real

I have been a high school choral director for over eleven years. The last decade has been filled with many beautiful moments, wonderful music, and even some students who have learned a few things.

There is another constant, however, that has a less than positive edge to it. Many of my years have been spent second-guessing myself, wondering if I'm good enough, comparing myself to others, and suffering imposter syndrome. Much of my journey in working to get over that in recent years has involved recognizing my own innate insecurities.

However, there is something else going on in Colorado and the United States choral landscape in general – *choral elitism*. I couldn't put my finger on it in those early years, but as I look back on it, elitism was at the core of a lot of my anxiety.

Here are some things that weren't specifically said to me, but I felt...

"I'm better than you because my choir is performing at this level and your choir is not."

"If your choir isn't performing at a certain level, you aren't as valuable to the profession."

"If you aren't the best, you are nothing."

Perhaps I will be dismissed as just being an overly sensitive director. However, I have overheard and even been a part of the post concert reactions/discussions at festivals, CMEA conferences, and ACDA conferences. I am not immune. I have been just as guilty as anyone else. What is said often comes from an elitist perspective. There is no denying it. This is a real thing.

Last year's National ACDA, for example, was a hotbed for some of the most pretentious/elitist conversations I've ever heard. This has been going on for a long time in our field and it's passed down from one generation of choral directors to the next.

I believe that two questions should be addressed. What is the problem with this? And what do we do about it?

1. What is the problem with choral elitism?

Directing choirs is an incredibly vulnerable thing. We have to put ourselves and our kids out there in order to grow our programs and improve our craft. We should receive authentic feedback from trusted professionals as often as possible, self-evaluate performance videos and recordings, and soak up as much knowledge as we can from experts in the field and shape those tools to best fit our teaching personality.

The problem is that putting our kids out there in front of our colleagues is scary. Sharing our work is scary. If someone walks out on stage feeling as if their work isn't valued, it not only harms the director, but it harms the students. If we are not lifting each other up, it can destroy the confidence needed for teachers to truly hit their stride.

And what we are modeling for our students? They pick up on elitism as much as adults, but their self-confidence is even more fragile. We can miss out on an opportunity to teach a very important life skill to students at this crucial age. There are many other issues to bring up, but this article doesn't have the room.

2. What do we do about it?

I can't pretend to have the tools to single-handedly solve a deeply embedded problem, but I think there are some simple things we can do.

First, there is room for greatness from all of us in the field! We don't have to be threatened by someone else's success. Seeing someone's work should be celebrated – every time!

Second, our world needs to know what we are doing. SHARE SHARE SHARE...all of it! Share videos and recordings of your students on social media. Post successes of all kinds. This does not have to be an award, it can be a beautiful letter a student wrote you, a great fall concert, or even getting everyone in your men's chorus to match pitch for the first time! And for goodness sake, make a positive comment when you see someone has shared something. It was likely really vulnerable for them to do it and they need to be lifted up and given some affirmation.

Lastly, allow yourself to listen to your colleagues' performances with a critical ear, but also keep a mind and ear out for things that are being done well. Approach them after and highlight those good things. When talking with your colleague about it, bring up some positive elements of the performance. Chances are they are well aware of what didn't go well. Let's not deny it – we ALL need to hear some positive cognition when we put ourselves out there.

Choir is a beautiful thing. Maybe one of the most beautiful things amongst the negativity in our world. Let's do all we can to make it more beautiful. Peace, everyone.

The choral music of Black composers has garnered a significant place in the repertoire over the last 30 or so years, yet there is still much music from this composer demographic that is underperformed or untouched. In the name of inclusivity and diversity many directors regularly program settings of Negro Spirituals, but to only program the spiritual is to disregard the many original compositions and text settings by Black composers.

Settings of poetry and biblical texts comprise the majority of “non-spiritual” choral music by Black composers, including some of the most skillful marriages of text and music. The listings below are an incredibly small representation of this largely underutilized repertoire.

Composer	Title	Poet/Text Source	Voicing	Accompaniment
Carter, Roland	Hold Fast to Dreams	Langston Hughes	SATB, div.	Piano
	Lift Every Voice and Sing	J. Rosamund Johnson/James Weldon Johnson	SATB	Piano
Dawson, William L.	Out in the Fields	Elizabeth Barrett Browning	SATB div.	Piano
Dent, Cedric	Examine Me	Psalm 26	SATB	Piano
Garrett, Marques	Seek Ye First	Matthew 6	TTB	a cappella
Hailstork, Adolphus	Little Lamb	Paul Laurence Dunbar	SATB	a cap.
	The Cloths of Heaven	William Butler Yeats	SATB	a cap.
	The Lamb	William Blake	SATB	a cap.
Johnson, Victor	The Cloths of Heaven	Yeats	SATB, SAB	Piano
	The River Sleeps Beneath the Sky	Dunbar	3-part mixed	Piano
McLin, Lena	Let the People Sing Praise Unto the Lord	Psalm 150	SATB	Piano, trumpet
Moore, Undine S.	Striving After God	Michelangelo	SATB	a cap.
Powell, Rosephanye D.	Arise Beloved	Song of Solomon	SATB, div.	Piano
	I Dream a World	Hughes	SATB	Piano
	To Sit and Dream	Hughes	SATB, div.	Piano
Thomas, Andre J.	Fences	Neil Lorenz	SATB	Piano
	Hold Fast to Dreams	Hughes	SATB	Piano
	I Dream a World	Hughes	SATB, SSA, SAB, 2-part	Piano
	Walk in My Shoes	Lorenz	SATB	Piano

The Benefits of Joining a Professional Music Association

How many times as a professional conductor do you become aware that musically, you are an “island unto yourself?” Every decision is yours: programming, recruiting, publicity, travel, fund-raising, vocal issues, navigating interpersonal relationships within your choir...EVERYTHING. For individuals working as the sole musical decision-maker in your church, rural school district, or community choir, the weight of responsibility can be overwhelming. At other times, you simply long for fresh ideas and approaches, literature suggestions, performance opportunities for your choir, or the occasion to speak with someone who experiences similar issues. Thankfully, individuals do have a place to turn when isolation affects productivity and creativity: a professional music association.

No matter the profession, association membership brings with it a list of similar rewards. Lauren Bayne Anderson (2011) encourages young professionals and students to join a professional organization in order to enjoy the following benefits: job listings, mentoring, professional development, networking, and scholarships. Education, annual conventions, certification, targeted products and resources, career assistance and web sites are among the incentives of association membership for individuals in the nursing profession (Greggs-McQuilkin, 2005, p.19). Kelly Cherwin (2010) encourages all professionals to become a member of a synergistic group because the effect of a collection of people is greater than that of just one person. For choral conductors/music educators that synergistic group is the American Choral Directors Association (ACDA).

As a choral conductor, what does membership in ACDA afford you? The following opportunities are included as benefits of your membership:

1. Publications

- Choral Journal- ACDA’s flagship publication, published monthly providing both practical and scholarly information about choral music.
- ChoirTeach- ACDA’s online magazine for choral director/music educators who need fresh ideas to meet practical needs.
- International Journal of Research in Choral Singing- ACDA’s online scientific research journal.

2. Educational Resources

- Choral Net- The professional networking site for the global online choral community.
- Educational videos- A wide range of videos are available on ACDA’s YouTube channel.
- Graduate Credit & Continuing Education Units- Offered for selected national and divisional conference activities.
- Activities- seminars and workshops, international conductor exchange programs, and master classes.

3. Your Choral Students

- Ability to sponsor students auditioning for honor choirs at the state, divisional, and national levels.
- Ability to audition your choir to be among the top performance choirs at state, divisional, and national conferences.

4. Conferences

- Conferences are offered at the state, divisional and national levels. National conferences are held on odd-numbered years, and division conferences on even-numbered years. Many states host a variety of conferences and workshops to meet numerous interests.

5. ACDA Mentoring

- ACDA mentoring program for choral teachers and conductors is now available across the country. Please visit <http://mentoring.acda.org> for additional information, and suggestions on how you may become involved.

6. Other Benefits

- ACDA offers many other benefits from the state level up to the national level, with opportunities to be involved in developing repertoire and standards in the field, advocating for arts education, taking on leadership roles in the association, helping your students develop, and gaining a range of experiences- all of which contribute to excellence in choral music.

For conductors who are not ACDA members, please let me encourage you to consider our organization. For those who are current members, may I encourage you to maximize your membership by finding ways to take advantage of the countless opportunities and resources available to you, and by introducing and encouraging others in the profession to likewise become ACDA members? Together, through synergistic efforts, we can eliminate the need for choral conductors to operate as “islands unto themselves.”

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