

VOICE



THE NEWSLETTER OF THE CHESTER CHILDREN'S CHORUS

FALL 2023

A CELEBRATION 30 YEARS IN THE MAKING

Get your party hats ready because in a few short months, the Chester Children's Chorus will be celebrating its 30th anniversary throughout 2024.

The program has grown by leaps and bounds since Dr. John Alston founded it in 1994 with just seven boys.

Take a look back as John reflects on 30 years of helping Chester children flourish through music, math, love, and practice. He shares his thoughts on where we started, where we've been, and where we're headed. Plus, he also reveals some of his favorite—and funniest—memories.

A Man with a Vision and a Van

"I had this naïve idea that I was going to recreate my Newark Boys Chorus experience," recalls John. "In that chorus, I recognized my passion immediately. By seventh grade, I knew that I wanted to make music for the rest of my life."

An associate professor of music at Swarthmore College, John pitched his idea to two (now retired) colleagues, Maurice Eldridge, vice president of college and community relations and President Al Bloom. Both loved the idea, and both would be instrumental in the CCC's growth.



JOHN WEIMILLER

The CCC has grown by leaps and bounds since Dr. John Alston founded it in 1994 with just seven boys.

"The College loaned me one of their vans to pick up the boys from school. For at least five years, it was just a one-man show. I was picking up kids and rehearsing. I didn't know that it could be what we have now," said John.

"But, back then, I wouldn't have been able to manage anything bigger. Those seven boys had enough interest, love, and patience to get the best out of me. I was always my best when I was with those boys. We were a little boys club—The Chester Boys Chorus.

"It was just so perfect. We couldn't sing a lick for those first few years but it was so beautiful—love at first sight, actually." By the second year, the chorus grew to 14 boys.

"In the third or fourth year, we brought in two sisters," recalls John. "They were hanging out after school waiting for their younger brothers and they would help me serve snacks. Then they began rehearsing with the boys, and we all started sight reading and learning music together."

A CCC Growth Spurt

A decade after the CCC was formed, nearly 60 children were participating in the program. By that time, John was holding informal auditions in several schools across Chester.

Word was getting out among third graders that "Dr. Johnny" would be stopping by their classrooms to play music games.

Today, the CCC holds yearly auditions in every elementary school in Chester.

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30 YEARS

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A Music and Math Medley

A course change came in 2013 when Alston decided to resign as a Swarthmore College music professor to focus entirely on the CCC.

"Though I think I knew five years earlier that this would be my life's work," said John. "I guess it took me that long to find the courage to resign."

Little did John know that fractions and algebra would be a part of that life's work.

In 2017, two girls in the chorus, frustrated with their school-year math experience, wanted to practice math in the summer. That simple request spawned the creation of the CCC Math Practice Program that became a requirement for all children two years later.

The CCC welcomed its first Education Director, Dana Semos, in 2018 along with a handful of Swarthmore College student math coaches. Kevin Downs, the CCC's full-time math teacher, joined in 2019.

Today, CCC children now practice math as much as they rehearse music.

The CCC also employs nearly 50 Swarthmore College students as math coaches during the school-year.

Another new addition joined the CCC in 2013 to help teach the youngest children in third, fourth, and fifth grades. After rejecting 100 resumes and four interviewees, John received a recommendation from a friend and reached out to Sean Tripline, who was a music minister at Philadelphia's Second Mount Zion Baptist Church.

"Sean came in and he played some hip little gospel number and then on the spot, I asked him to play it again and call out the chords as he was playing them. He knew exactly what he was playing," said John. "And then he sang 'Ev'ry Valley Shall Be Exalted' from Handel's *Messiah*.

It was a no-brainer to hire him. Sean has been an extraordinary addition; he changed our groove."

A Plan for the Future

The CCC is in the last phase of a five-year strategic planning process.

The goal of this process is to ensure John's vision continues when the time comes for him to pass the baton.

"When I started the CCC, I didn't know what I was supposed to be doing, and I was too afraid to ask anybody for help," said John. "It's part of why I am so driven to help the children prepare for life after high school, after Chester.

"We must become the program that allows our children to fulfill their potential," he added. "We're halfway there. If we can find a way to create a language arts program that is as good as our Math Practice Program, our children will be prepared to reach their peak."

As he reflects on his journey, John has some sage advice for the John of 30 years ago.

"You have no idea what you're getting yourself into but this is your 'forever thing' and it's going to be OK. It's going to be better than OK. It's going to be more wonderful than I can possibly describe to you." ♪

AND THE AWARD GOES TO...

John's focus has always been on the children of Chester and therefore, he prefers to stay out of the spotlight. However, we'd like to congratulate him on receiving the Swarthmore Centennial Association's Shine a Light Award in June of 2023.

The award honors a member of the Swarthmore community who has demonstrated compassion, perseverance, courage, and leadership by engaging in the important work of fostering human dignity and our common humanity.

Read the story at: <https://bit.ly/ShinealightAward>.





THE MEMORY GAME: JOHN ALSTON EDITION

Funny memory?

"At one point I hired Swarthmore College students to drive the children. One student ended up taking the children across the Commodore Barry Bridge [into New Jersey] thinking she was coming back to Swarthmore."

Funniest memory?

"When that boy Romello asked me 15 years ago if I had written 'Let It Be.' I wish that I had said 'yes' and told him I am glad that he likes the song and enjoyed my moment, just for a second."

Sweet memory?

"Peggy Thompson (long time CCC booster) volunteered to make peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and help me rehearse in the early days. Like a perfect grandmother, she used to cut the edges off the sandwiches—like she would for her own grandchildren—and she'd stack them up in pyramids. She'd bring in grapes and apple juice, too."

Regrettable memory?

"I wish that I had lost my ponytail the second I stepped on the Swarthmore College campus."





A SUMMER OF FIRSTS



Although classes weren't in session at Swarthmore College this past summer, the campus was still buzzing with the joy and energy of 132 Chester children who called the campus home for five weeks during the CCC's Summer Learning Program (SLP).

It's hard to miss seeing (or hearing) the children as they fill College science labs and art studios, explore the many plants and trees around campus, slide down inflatable water slides, and enjoy a BBQ lunch outside.

The summer was one of firsts in many ways.

Forty-two children—most of whom were rising third graders—spent their first summer with the CCC getting to know us and vice versa. After five weeks of rehearsals, those children cautiously stepped on stage for the first time and knocked it out of the park as our children so often do. Our youngest children quickly realized how thrilling performing can be thanks to many of you cheering for and encouraging them.



At the summer concerts, the culmination of the SLP, the entire choir performed the first-ever country music set in the CCC's near 30-year history.

"There is a serious reason that we sang country music," said CCC Executive and Artistic Director John Alston. "Some folks who love country music may not think they have much in common with our Chester children. So, we hope that when we sing country music, folks who love the music and our children become a little closer and respect and understand each other a bit more."



The children brought their inner cowboys/girls out as they sang "Achy Breaky Heart," "Summertime," "Life Is a Highway," "Wagon Wheel," and more. Don't miss the encore performance available on our YouTube channel. Plus, stay tuned for the CCC's music video premiere of "Take Me Home Country Roads."

Just Keep Swimming and Exploring

Our swimming and arboretum classes were also back for the first time since the pandemic. For many of the children, this was the first time they received formal swim instruction.

We partnered with Kids First Swim School in Aston, Pennsylvania where our third, fourth, and fifth graders learned critical life-saving water skills. Notably, most of the children were able to tread water, and half of them were able to swim one length of the pool after just five weeks.

"The CCC is a disciplined group of children whose passion for adventure is so bright," said Todd Hill, director of aquatics at Kids First. "Teaming up these little ones and their eagerness to learn allowed us to win every moment."

On dry land, the fourth-graders explored Swarthmore College's Scott



Arboretum alongside its staff. The arboretum class focuses on plant sciences and allows our children to get their hands dirty while learning about science in an immersive, fun environment.

One of the highlights of the class for both the children and instructors was the "Meet the Expert" activity. Students completed activities with 10 Arboretum staff members. Activities included: Garden Design, Insect Friend or Foe Game, Native versus Invasive Species Game, and Sunflower Investigation. The activity allowed students to see the wide range of topics the staff studies while working at the Arboretum.

"My hope is that the children have a positive experience working with the plants and to form a connection with the nature around them,"



explained CCC instructor Rachel Warren, assistant education programs manager for youth, families, and diverse audiences at Scott Arboretum. "We want the children to know that the Arboretum is a welcoming place for them to come and enjoy."

The Cherry on Top

We've saved the best for last—lunch. The CCC was among the first groups to enjoy lunch at Swarthmore College's new Dining Center that opened in 2023.

While the majority of children ran straight to the chicken fingers and fries, a brave few tried the tofu and vegan options. ♪



YOU'RE INVITED TO THE NEW DINING CENTER! Join us at the CCC's 30th Anniversary Celebration being held at the Dining Center on March 9, 2024 (chicken fingers and fries not included). Visit ChesterChildrensChorus.org for details.

Save The Date

SAVE THE DATE TO CELEBRATE!

Whether you're near or far, we invite you to join us at our 30th Anniversary Celebration on Saturday, March 9, 2024 at Swarthmore College's new Dining Center.

The event will highlight the CCC's 30-year commitment to Chester children and honor the many supporters who helped us reach this milestone.

The evening's honorees are John Wehmiller '66 and Paula Lawrence-Wehmiller '67 who have been supporting and sharing the CCC's work for decades.

The event will include a live CCC performance, award presentation, remarks from CCC Executive and Artistic Director John Alston, and live and silent auctions.

Can't join us in person? You can still participate in the event by joining our Community Circle. You'll have the opportunity to share your favorite CCC memories on a special notecard that will be displayed at the celebration.

Learn More at
ChesterChildrensChorus.org



PARTNER SPOTLIGHT PINCUS FAMILY FOUNDATION

Children are the heart of the CCC just as they are to the Pincus Family Foundation (PFF) which has been a CCC partner since 2015.

Created in 2005 by philanthropists Gerry and David Pincus (1926-2011), the PFF supports its non-profit partners to develop and enhance programs that improve the lives of children, their families, and their communities.

The PFF first became involved with the CCC in 2015. They sponsored winter coats that the children wore during their performance at the inauguration of Pennsylvania Governor Tom Wolf.

Current CCC Board Chair and long-time CCC supporter, Elizabeth Pincus-Rubin made the initial connection with the PFF, as she also serves on its board of directors.

"It was clear to me from the start that the PFF would be a perfect partner for the Chorus," said Rubin.

Most recently, the PFF awarded the CCC a two-year, \$200,000 grant that will partially be used to shine a light on the CCC's work over the past three decades through video.

"We are grateful for this grant, which will help us to better show the world

how beautiful our Chester children are," said CCC Executive and Artistic Director John Alston.

PFF Executive Director Danielle Scott still remembers her first site visit to the CCC when it was renting space in Chester.

"That night told me everything that I needed to know about John Alston and how dedicated he is to the children in this program. It's not just a music program for him, it really is a way for him to uplift the children and community of Chester to say 'look what we can produce here.' So, it's for those reasons that we always feel good to be able to say 'yes, we want to continue to support the CCC."

The PFF support has also allowed the CCC's Math Practice Program to grow since its creation in 2017.

"I am deeply grateful to the Pincus Family Foundation for its support of our academic programs. The PFF invested early in our Math Practice Program, allowing us to purchase essential supplies and to hire math coaches—enough to work with every young person participating in the program," said CCC Managing and Education Director Dana Semos. "The PFF truly partners with the CCC to help all of our children learn and grow." ♪

To learn more about the PFF,
visit pincusfamilyfoundation.org.



A New Adventure Awaits

When Elisa DeNofio started as a part-time administrative assistant with the CCC in 2005, the program was half the size that it is today.

Over the next 18 years, she had a front row seat to watching the program—and her responsibilities—grow.

Elisa became full-time in 2006 and has been keeping the wheels running at the CCC ever since. In fact, she manages the transportation schedule and the seven drivers who bring the children to and from the CCC year-round.

Elisa also communicates with parents about schedules and concerts; facilitates auditions in every elementary school in Chester; helps to organize the children's learning schedules; and assists with budget planning.

"Elisa is our Italian mama bear," said CCC Executive and Artistic Director John Alston. "If we need it, she'll get it no matter what."

Everyone at the CCC is excited for Elisa's newest adventure—retirement—beginning in February 2024.

"It is hard to imagine the Chester Children's Chorus without Elisa. She knows everything and everyone, she is a master puzzle-solver, and above all, she is kind and gracious with every person she interacts with—children, parents, and colleagues," said Dana Semos, CCC managing and education director. "I will miss having her with us, but I could not be more grateful for all of Elisa's hard work in helping the CCC evolve over the last 18 years. From the bottom of my heart, thank you, Elisa!"

Elisa is heading to Italy for three months in April with stops planned in Paris and London.

"When you say 18 years out loud, it seems like a very long time but it didn't feel like it. My years with the CCC have been filled with friends, families, and fun," said DeNofio.



Elisa DeNofio has been part of the CCC for nearly two decades.

"Everyone has touched my life in a special way. I'd love to thank the Swarthmore College staff who not only made my job easier, but who became my friends; the CCC full-time, and summer staff—especially John and Andrea Knox for giving me the opportunity to work here; the CCC van drivers; and the children and their families. I'm so grateful to have been a part of such a wonderful organization."

Congratulations, Elisa! Thank you for all the love and dedication you've given to the children and the entire CCC family. We will miss you. ♪

A GIFT FOR THE NEXT 30 YEARS

To kick off the CCC's 30th Anniversary celebration, Cordelia Delson, a longtime CCC supporter and former board chair, created a Charitable Gift Annuity (CGA) to benefit the CCC.

"Every now and then, a perfect combination comes along that you just can't resist," said Delson. "I was able to combine my unwavering belief in the children of the CCC with meaningful support



Cordelia Delson's Charitable Gift Annuity will benefit the CCC.

by creating a Charitable Gift Annuity from my IRA. I couldn't be more pleased with this arrangement and highly recommend it."

A CGA is a unique philanthropic tool that allows you to make a meaningful gift to a nonprofit organization while also ensuring

a stable income stream for yourself or a loved one. CCC supporters who establish CGAs receive immediate tax benefits, including: lowering income

tax, a charitable deduction for a portion of your donation, and potential reductions in capital gains taxes.

Recent changes in tax law from the Secure 2.0 bill have made this type of gift even easier for individuals over 70½ years old by allowing gifts to be made with a qualified charitable distribution from an IRA. ♪

The CCC partners with Swarthmore College's gift planning team to accept CGAs. You can learn more about this unique opportunity to make a purposeful contribution while also guaranteeing income for life, at swarthmore.giftplans.org.



CCC STAFF

John Alston, Executive & Artistic Director

Elisa De Nofio, Program Coordinator

Kevin Downs, Lead Math Teacher

Carolyn Marzo, Director of Development

Christina Meehan, Communications & Outreach Manager

Dana Semos, Managing & Education Director

Sean Tripline, Assistant Music Director

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Swarthmore College Staff

The Chester Children's Chorus is an affiliated program of Swarthmore College and receives generous in-kind support from the College, but raises its own funds to cover all direct expenses.

Official tax receipts for charitable contributions to the Chorus come directly from the College.

CHESTER CHILDREN'S CHORUS
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DON'T MISS A BEAT!

While our newsletter is published twice a year, we also periodically send emails with concert news, program updates, anniversary highlights, and an exclusive behind-the-scenes look at rehearsals.

Don't miss out—sign up online at ChesterChildrensChorus.org/signup or scan this QR code with your phone's camera.

You may opt out of receiving emails at any time.



UPCOMING PERFORMANCE SCHEDULE

WINTER CONCERTS: December 15 & 16, 2023 at 7:30 p.m.

The December 16 concert will be livestreamed on our Facebook and YouTube pages.

MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR. CONCERT: January 13, 2024 at 4 p.m.

SPRING CONCERTS: May 17, 2024 at 7:30 p.m. & May 19, 2024 at 4 p.m.

All Performances are at Lang Music Building, Swarthmore College.

Admission is free. Seating is limited and on a first-come, first-served basis.

Visit ChesterChildrensChorus.org for more information.



MUSIC AND MATH MAKE GREAT GIFTS

As the season of giving approaches, please consider making a tax-deductible gift by December 31 to help our children continue to develop a strong voice, strong mind, and strong spirit. If you have already made a gift, we thank you for your support!

SHOW YOUR SUPPORT: Donate online at ChesterChildrensChorus.org/give or mail a check payable to Chester Children's Chorus to Chester Children's Chorus, Swarthmore College, 500 College Ave., Swarthmore, PA 19081.



DON'T FORGET TO FOLLOW US!



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