Finding our Talented New Children

I am in a second-grade classroom in Chester, on my annual search for the 15 children who will become our new Training Chorus.

“I’d like to play a game with you,” I say to the children. “Everyone stand up.” Big smiles. “Let’s shake,” I say, and 25 bodies do the Harlem Shake. Suddenly, I call, “Attention.” The children are instantly still, then burst out laughing. Wonderful! We can play together, which is what we need to do before we can sing together.

This is one of the 27 second-grade Chester classrooms I visit each year, and in every one I am amazed and inspired by the joy, exuberance, and innocence of these tiny children—and their talent! As I write this, I have completed half of this year’s visits and have already found 40 children who would be superb additions to the chorus.

Now I start a call and response game. I clap four times, the children clap back. I add some Latin and hip-hop rhythms. There are grins of recognition. One child says, “You’re funny.” I make a goofy face. “You’re funny, too.”

The next game is “I sing, you sing back.” Some children are excited, others bewildered, a few unenthusiastic. I tell them there are some really good singers in this class, and we’ve only got a few minutes to find each other, so those who enjoy our singing games should continue to stand. It’s okay for the others to sit down. A couple of children sit. The rest are ready.

Chorus Gets $50K Grant To Add Children, Make CD

In January the chorus received the largest grant in its history: $50,000 from the U.S. Department of Education. Of the funds, $33,000 will be used during the next 3 years to help support expansion of the chorus by at least 25 percent, and $17,500 is earmarked to cover the cost of recording our first CD this summer. The grant was made possible through the efforts of Chester Mayor Wendell Butler Jr. and U.S. Sen. Rick Santorum, who have our great thanks.

This summer, we will add 15 new children to bring chorus membership to 75. “Bringing more children into the chorus is the most important thing we do, and it’s wonderful to have this grant to help us do it,” director John Alston said. He noted that the chorus is seeking funding in addition to this grant to cover the full costs of the expansion.

Chorus members are already excited about the CD project, which will bring a recording engineer to Lang Music Building this summer to record 10 gospel numbers that Alston wrote especially for the children. “We’re recording gospel because the children love to sing these songs and because they express a central teaching of our program, which is that we must all love each other and take care of each other,” Alston said.

Other organizations whose lead gifts have helped sustain the chorus program are First Keystone Bank; the Elsie Lee Garthwaite Memorial Foundation; the Hamilton Family Foundation; Independence Foundation; the Philadelphia Foundation; the Presser Foundation; the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts; and the Ethel Sergeant Clark Smith Memorial Foundation.

To make a tax-deductible contribution, please detach this coupon, complete, and mail to the following address:

Chester Children’s Chorus, Swarthmore College, Department of Music and Dance, 500 College Avenue, Swarthmore PA 19081

☐ Enclosed is a check in the amount of ☐ $35 ☐ $75 ☐ $100 ☐ $250 ☐ $500 ☐ $1,000 ☐ Other: ____.  (Check should be payable to Swarthmore College with Chester Children’s Chorus in memo field)

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hands, and I invite them to the front of the room.

The children are excited and nervous. We talk about not wanting to hurt any- one’s feelings. Instead, I suggest, “You need to think of the person singing, wish that they do well, and cheer them when they’re done.” We hook pinky fin- gers in a promise to support each other.

Then, something completely unex- pected happens. Entirely unprompted, the children begin to hold hands. They are keeping their promise, encouraging and congratulating each other. I am moved beyond words.

Four of these children will be invited to join the chorus. But we know from experience that most families who receive invitations won’t enroll their children, and if they did, we couldn’t take them all. I leave the school buoyed by the children and sad that we can’t scoop all of them under our wings—but hopeful that one or two will find their way to us and sing with us for a long time.

—John Alston

Chester School of the Arts Moves Ahead

Planning a future academic and arts school in Chester is exhausting but inspira- tional work. In January, John Alston and Wendy Emrich, managing director of the school initiative, revisited the Central Park East schools in Harlem to learn more about the child-centered teaching that produces enthusiastic scholars in urban public schools. They spent the day with Deborah Meier, the schools’ international- ly-known founder, who will continue to advise us on pedagogy and curriculum for our school.

We welcomed new board members Charles Gray and Eric Kraeutler in Febru-

ary. Charles chaired the Chester Educa- tion Foundation for more than a decade and is former director of the Pennsylva- nia Office of Juvenile Justice and Delin- quency Prevention. Eric is a partner in the Philadelphia law firm of Morgan, Lewis & Bockius and a former assistant U.S. attorney.

We are heartened that generous donors have contributed or pledged $285,000 toward our goal of $500,000 to fund our development efforts. We plan to open the school in 2008 with grades K-2, adding one grade each year. Stay tuned for more news as the school unfolds over the months and years ahead!

College Kids Teach Chorus Kids Science

The summer Science for Kids program has been extended through the school year thanks to Simone Doyle ’07, who leads science workshops for nine chorus members on Saturday afternoons. Simone, shown here helping chorister Ari McCready with a microscope, taught biology to the children last summer as an intern under Associate Professor of Biology Elizabeth Vallen, and enjoyed it so much she planned the school year lessons. In the project shown here, the children collected soil samples, made slides of them, and used micro- scopes to examine samples for bacteria. Participat- ing chorus members are 10 to 13 years old. Col- lege students working with Simone are Zoe Bridges-Curry ’09, Ethan Doyle ’08, Keefe Keelay ’06, Callie Planquin ’09, Emma Schneider ’06, Matthew Tom ’07, and Ian Yaretz ’09.

Chorus Provides Piano Lessons for Five Members

Ja’Quay Lundy, 10, is one of five Concert Choir members selected for piano lessons this year on the basis of musical readiness and commitment to the chorus program. John Alston is teaching Ja’Quay; Jennifer Foster, 12; and Craig Robin- son, 15; Sara Posey ’04, who has taught music in our Summer Learning Program for the past three years, is giving piano lessons to Asia Cher- ry, 10, and Jazmin Sarinana, 10.

What’s New?

Chester Children’s Chorus

John Alston, founder and director
Andrea Knox ’84, managing director
Advisory Board
Cecilia Delan, president
Scott Kesler, vice president and secretary
Leslie Price, treasurer
Maurice Eldridge ’91, ex officio
Swarthmore College
Wendy Emrich
Edmund Jones ’39
Sandra Robinson
Voice
The Newsletter of the Chester Children’s Chorus
Andrea Knox, editor
Phillip Stern ’86, designer
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Chester Children’s Chorus

Come Read with a Child this Summer

Director John Alston describes our summer reading hour as “the most beautiful part of our summer day.” It begins at 1 p.m. In a swirl of noise and energy, as the children run out into the lobby to meet their volunteers and choose books. Soon an hour-long hush descends, as each child settles down with an adult reading buddy somewhere in Lang Music Building.

We will need 40 adult volunteers this summer to help make the hush happen— and to help eager children 8 to 10 years old maintain or improve their reading skills. Each volunteer reads with one child, and we give preference to men and women who can come regularly for 3 to 5 weeks in order to build a bond of trust and shared experiences with a child.

The reading hour runs from 1 p.m. to 2 p.m. Reading days are Monday, Tues- day, and Wednesday from June 26 through July 27, and Thursdays June 29, July 6, and July 27. For more informa- tion, contact the chorus office at (610) 328-8180 or ccc@swarthmore.edu, or visit www.chesterchildrenschorus.org and click on “You Can Help!”

... New Children

(continued)