

# *John Alston Wins Shine a Light Award*

by Katie McKinstry

The Swarthmore Centennial Foundation has awarded the 2023 Shine A Light Award to Dr. John Alston, in recognition of his contributions in making Swarthmore a more diverse, inclusive, and equitable place to work, do business, and live. Dr. Alston is the Founder and Executive and Artistic Director of The Chester Children's Chorus (CCC).

The CCC is housed in the heart of Swarthmore, on Harvard Avenue just off Chester Road. The chorus provides opportunities for 100 talented children from Chester, Pennsylvania, ages 7-18, to realize and showcase their potential through music. In addition to music, children in the chorus participate in intensive, year-round math instruction and a full day summer program. The program is free to participants and provides experiences otherwise inaccessible to most Chester residents.

Dr. Alston's artistic passions and understanding of social change anchors the CCC, but the path was not always obvious. In 1994, Dr. Alston sought to create a chorus in Chester similar to the one he experienced growing up in the Newark Boys Chorus, an organization whose focus was solely musical excellence. But after starting the CCC, he found that the children he worked with needed more than music. "At the time, I didn't know words like social justice, inequity, inequality, and social-economic stratum," says Dr. Alston, but he learned them as he evolved the CCC to be an organization that, "gives the children the experiences they deserve," through mentorship, community, and expansive summer programming. Dr. Alston counsels students, helping them through their daily conflicts and circumstances of tragedy or instability. Ten years ago, Dr. Alston chose to give up his college professorship appointment to focus on the

CCC full time, demonstrating his commitment to children of Chester.

Because the CCC headquarters and performance space are in Swarthmore, community members are fortunate to conveniently attend CCC concerts and volunteer in summer programs. The CCC performs nine free concerts a year, and for many audience members, the experience is transformative. Under Dr. Alston's visionary direction, the children perform some of the greatest and most challenging choral works ever written, including Mozart's Requiem and Handel's Messiah, inspiring awe and admiration from the audience through the power of music.

Due to Dr. Alston's ties with the college and town, community members get the opportunity to form connections with the talented young artists. Working with children in the CCC is a source of pride for Swarthmore College faculty, staff, and students who host and support academic programming. Volunteer summer reading mentors meet daily with their 8-year-old reading buddies, providing stability and affection. For many children, this is one of the first experiences of uninterrupted interaction they have had with an adult. Mentors have the chance to recognize the child as an individual and be interested in what they have to say. As Cordelia Delson, CCC board member emerita describes, the experience, "is giving opportunities for volunteers to get to know the children and what they're capable of doing, and to understand that they deserve the same opportunities that children in affluent communities get automatically."

An award presentation will take place on Thursday, June 15, at 6:30 p.m. during the "Nights in the Ville" celebration in downtown

(continued on page 5)

# Shine a Light Award (continued from page 1)

Swarthmore. The award includes a monetary prize of \$2,500. The Swarthmore Centennial Foundation's mission is to provide for the betterment of Swarthmore, the improvement of the community, its children, and its citizens now and in the future.

For more information on the Chester Children's Chorus, including opportunities to volunteer and donate, please visit their website at [www.swarthmore.edu/chester-childrens-chorus](http://www.swarthmore.edu/chester-childrens-chorus). The CCC's next concerts are on Thursday, July 27, at 2 p.m., Friday, July 28, at 7:30 p.m., and Saturday, July 29, at 7:30 p.m., at the Lang Music Building at Swarthmore College.