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Of Mind and Heart: Teaching More than Music in Choir

by Sarah J.G. Hilden

“What is success?”

Many might respond to his question with an answer like, “Receiving a superior rating at contest,” or “Winning a prestigious choral competition.” These are experiences that make us feel good about our choirs and what we do, but do they really constitute success? I recently returned from a weekend choir retreat with two of my high school choirs. Throughout the weekend, we spent time learning from each other and growing as individuals. We talked about trust, motivation, music theory, vocal technique, and many other aspects of choral music and life.

During that weekend I rediscovered how much more we teach kids in choir than music. As choral directors, we deal with the emotional side of life through music. We address issues of trust and self-confidence, which are often difficult issues for teenagers to face. I saw students learn from each other and struggle with tough issues in their lives. Students were spending time and working with people outside of their regular peer groups. These kids were learning how to deal with others, work as a team, and gain self-confidence.

I did my undergraduate work at Whitworth College in Spokane, Washington. One of the things that made Whitworth special to me is the mission statement of the college where it says; “Whitworth’s mission is to provide its diverse student body with an education of the mind and heart.” This mission has become a motto for me in my teaching of the choral art.

While music requires skill and technical knowledge, without the component that the heart brings into it, one can never fully experience the power of music through song. I teach music theory, history and ear training in my choral classes because I believe these are crucial components to rehearsal. Students need these tools so that they can more successfully know the music they are singing. I also take the time to know my students. My accompanist, Valerie

Reich, has a favorite quote that we frequently share with others: “People don’t care how much you know until they know how much you care.” Becoming human to my students through getting to know them, discussing life issues and exploring trust has been one of the most valuable tools I could ever have used to heighten our rehearsal experience.

In order to be an effective choral musician, one must become vulnerable to others. One must be willing to “break down walls” and “take off masks” (to use some of the exact words that my students use) in order to grow as a person and allow the ensemble to flourish. The emotional aspect of choral singing can get lost and abused if it is not given the proper set-up and attention. The “journey” of a choir is not just about musical ability, but about the heart and soul of the choir combined with the musical aspects.

As high school choral directors, I believe that we influence and impact kids’ lives in ways that we cannot ever know. Many of us are where we are today because of the choral experiences that we have had throughout our lives. It is important for us to understand that we are not just providing our students with an education of the mind in music, but also an education of the heart.

“What is success?” This question has as many answers as there are people to answer it, but I believe that I have been successful as a director if my students somehow become better people because of the experiences they have had in my choral ensembles.

The experiences we have together create an environment where they receive a balanced “education of the mind and heart.”