

July 10, 2012

Serendipity (the act of finding something useful by chance)

by Gary Weidenaar, President, NW ACDA



Well, it's here! What, you may ask? On July 1, 2012 - following two years as president-elect, I became president of ACDA's Northwestern Division. There was no shift in the force. No Maya Angelou poem or Yo Yo Ma playing the cello. Not even Reg Unterseher recognizing that fact on Facebook - but it happened none the less.

First and very importantly - on behalf of the membership of NWACDA, I offer a sincere thank you to outgoing President Solveig Holmquist, who transitions to Vice-President now. She is four years into the six-year commitment made when she ran for this office. During the past two years, Solveig and I have had many enlightening conversations

that culminated in those regarding the preparation for and running of the Seattle 2012 conference. I thank her for her wisdom, sense of humor, and a lifetime of adding to the choral art!

One of the traditional communication tools of the NWACDA president is this website/newsletter, so ably developed and maintained by Howard Meharg. To that end, I have set a goal of writing an article every couple of months or so. Given the fact that my term is until June 30, 2014 that makes about 12 articles. So here goes . . .

ACDA has been a part of my professional life since I joined the organization in 1980 as a junior at Western Michigan University (WMU). My first conference was a regional one, in Madison Wisconsin.

The following March, I was one of thirteen choral education majors at WMU who drove overnight in three university vehicles from Kalamazoo to New Orleans, Louisiana for the 1981 National ACDA Conference. Arriving in New Orleans - since the event took place the week after Mardi Gras - I remember four-lane streets knee deep in empty cans of the alcohol-containing variety.

We saw choirs perform (one in particular - which you'll later find to be part of one of the major points in this article), met people, went to the exhibits, hung

out, ate beignets and drank (too many) hurricanes. We shared six to a room – and slept too little. During the entire conference, Mel Ivey, our Professor, proudly introduced us as his students to a who's who of choral musicians. The culminating event was Robert Shaw conducting the *Missa Solemnis* by Beethoven sung by five combined college choirs. It was life-altering to be in the presence of hundreds of choral aficionados enjoying the meticulous preparation Mr. Shaw exhibited in that wonderful concert.

That was my first ACDA experience – and I've been a member ever since. In total, I have attended eight regional and nine national conferences. I have seen scores of choirs made up of singers of all ages. I have met dozens upon dozens of fellow musicians, seen hundreds of interest sessions, been introduced to countless resources – ideas – ways of doing things . . .

ACDA conferences have given me much. They are a quality check (Is my choir anywhere close to the choirs I'm seeing on stage right now?), they are a spring of new repertoire, they are an enabling community of musicians, they recharge my battery as an educator.

ACDA has been the impetus for career-long friends and has allowed me to meet people who have become mentors. There are also times when ACDA serves to energize my musical life in unpredictable ways.

During our time in New Orleans, I vividly remember watching one of the performing choirs sing Robert Starer's "A little nonsense" and thinking – I can't believe how crystal clear the interpretation is. This is IMPRESSIVE!

Cut to some twenty-five years later – in Flagstaff, Arizona. One of my activities while teaching at Northern Arizona University was directing a church choir in town. Deral, a bass in my choir was in his late 70s, his wife Marie was a soprano. While other members had strong opinions and suggestions which they, ahem, often shared with me and the group, Deral never did. After a few months, I was talking to him before a church service and asked him what he did before retiring. He was a choir director, he said. Where? I asked him. At the University of Western Ontario in Canada, was his reply.

It turned out that he was a major figure in Canadian choral music for well over two decades, well-respected and known by the choral community in both Canada and the U.S. It also turned out that he and his wife lived literally a block from my house in Flagstaff.

A wonderful friendship grew from our interactions and I viewed him as a mentor. I made it a point every couple of weeks, to go to his house and we'd sit and talk repertoire, rehearsal technique, his experience, teaching in a college, and many non-choral topics. When it snowed a bunch, my son and I would

shovel his walk, and knock the snow off his satellite dish so they could watch TV. My son waxed his RV. That was the human side.

On the professional side, in a nutshell, I felt like I was at the feet of a master just soaking up everything he could offer. He ended up writing one of my letters of recommendation for the job I now hold at Central Washington University.

It turned out that the choir in New Orleans that impressed me so much was his choir! It took us a while to put two and two together – but we did, and I have his program from that performance as a wonderful memento of our time together. He passed away a couple of years ago, but I will always cherish the time he gave me.

By the way – his choir sang at two national conferences, the other in Kansas City – which has nothing to do with the story – but does speak to his standing as a choral musician.

Many of you have similar ACDA-related anecdotes. This organization thrusts people together in planned and unplanned ways. I, for one, learn daily from colleagues – both peers in the college arena and those teaching in the public/private school arena (where I spent 15 years as well). And just as importantly, I learn from the young, budding music educators who are my college students and those from sister institutions.

Keep your eyes open, participate, attend – you never know when you might have an opportunity to “gain” a mentor. ACDA has ways of creating opportunities for that to happen!

I look forward to meeting and serving you in this new role for the next two years. Whether you are a retired or active member, long time or first year student – please feel free to introduce yourself to me any time we are at an event. You are the reason there is an ACDA – and we will then both have an opportunity to learn from each other. Maybe like Dr. Deral Johnson and I did.

Wouldn't that be serendipitous?!