

Victoria's Gettin' Higher Choir model for singers around the globe

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Shivon Robinsong, Gettin' Higher Choir founder and co-director: "I never cease to be amazed at what people singing together can accomplish." Photograph By BRUCE STOTESBURY, Times Colonist

Victoria's Gettin' Higher Choir is well-known for having more than 300 singers and for raising hundreds of thousands of dollars for impoverished Africans and local youth over the past 20 years.

But what most Victorians might not know is the choir has been the model for dozens of other non-auditioned community choirs around the world — including a women's prison choir in Mexico, a hospice choir and a choir started by a Hollywood actor.

"I never cease to be amazed at what people singing together can accomplish," said Shivon Robinsong, choir founder and co-director. The Gettin' Higher Choir marks its 20th anniversary with concerts on June 10 and 11 at Alix Goolden Hall. They will be joined by internationally

renowned singer-songwriter Ann Mortifee, one of Robinsong's early mentors and one of the choir's first guest artists.

"She taught me early on that singing is about more than performing. It is primarily about healing and connection," she said.

When Robinsong started the Gettin' High Choir in 1996, she had recently moved from Cortes Island, where she helped found Hollyhock retreat centre and a non-auditioned choir. In Victoria with two young daughters, she set out to create a safe place for people to sing without being judged.

The choir started with about 40 members singing a cappella South African freedom songs. They performed at community events, including the city's now-defunct annual FolkFest. It was at this festival in 1998 that they befriended a local Mozambican choir.

The Mozambicans joined the Gettin' Higher Choir in a fundraising concert for Power of Hope, an organization dedicated to youth empowerment through the arts. A few months later, the two choirs got together to raise money for a village in Mozambique.

The village had been home to Joseph and Perpetua Alfazema, a couple who came to Canada as refugees in the 1980s. When they returned to their village to visit a few years later, the local chief asked them for help — namely for the struggling children who did not have a school.

"I wasn't sure we could do it, but we raised \$10,000," Robinsong said.

It was enough money to build a school and launch what is now the Caia Connection, a charitable organization that has helped build a school, grinding mill, and health and community centre in and around Kapasseni Village.

"Perpetua has become an incredible community leader," Robinsong said. The Alfazemas went back to Mozambique to establish the charity projects and programs, and now split their time between Edmonton, where they have three grown children, and Africa.

The Gettin' Higher Choir holds fundraising concerts twice a year. To date they have raised more than \$400,000 for the Caia Connection and \$200,000 for Power of Hope. The choir has 316 members who rehearse at three different times during the week. In 1999, Robinsong was joined by co-director Denis Donnelly, former director of the Victoria Conservatory of Music, who also does most of the choral arrangements.

In 2004, Robinsong and Donnelly decided to share their unique method of choral and community-building. They came up with the idea of a two-week intensive program that included teaching songs without sheet music and teaching pitch-challenged singers. The tuition for the Community Choir Leadership Training is about \$2,200 and includes a year of mentorship.

"There are lots of wonderful choral programs in schools out there, but they are oriented toward a standard repertoire and the assumption most can read music," Donnelly said. "This is about

forming groups of singers who don't have to read music and teaching them to feel the joys of harmonies.”

The concept was a hit. More than 114 choir leaders have graduated. They've started more than 50 choirs around the world, including a dozen on Vancouver Island. They've also started a network of choirs that do charitable and community good works.

Some graduates have launched careers, such as Tina Fillipino, whose Letz Sing network of choirs in the Comox Valley are now her full-time job.

Some use the training for healing, like a New York therapist who leads singing in shelters for abused women and for cancer patients. And a Seattle woman who is planning a grieving and healing concert where everyone in attendance sings for each other.

Others use it for community-building, like the weekly choir in a women's prison in Mexico City and another for the staff of a community health centre in Ottawa.

Maggie Wheeler is a Hollywood actor who was pursuing her “soul's work” as a singing-workshop teacher when she took the training.

“It was nothing short of life-changing for me,” said Wheeler, who is coincidentally most-known for her nasal-voiced recurring character Janice on the 1990s comedy Friends. She has also appeared on Seinfeld and was a regular on Ellen, Everybody Loves Raymond and Californication.

“I didn't at the time think I needed to start a choir, but something told me to go,” said Los Angeles-based Wheeler. She was inspired to start a choir that was accessible for people with kids, like herself.

When she returned home, she connected with Emile Hassan, a vocal-improvisation teacher and percussionist who had also done the choral leadership training in Victoria. Together they started the Golden Bridge Community Choir, providing arts and child-care for children of the singers. The choir is open to everyone — a novel concept in a city full of auditions.

“Los Angeles can feel like an isolating place. We don't handpick; the doors are open to everyone,” Wheeler said.

Retired Victoria doctor Mary-Wynne Ashford is both a Gettin' High Choir member and graduate of the choir leadership program. In 2012, she wanted to bring music back into her life. She had sung in choirs in her 30s but not since. Her hope was to start a small choir to sing songs from her Baha'i faith and others.

“There's a very interesting spiritual connection that goes between people singing. ... Their heartbeats begin to synchronize,” said Ashford, adding that music is a prescription she would endorse.

The Gettin' Higher Choir performs with Ann Mortifee on June 10 and 11 at 7:30 p.m. at Alix Goolden Performance Hall (907 Pandora Ave.). Tickets are \$30 (\$25 for students and seniors). They are available at gettinhigherchoir.ca and at Munro's Books, Ivy's Books, James Bay Coffee and Books and Dig This in Broadmead.

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