

Harmony at Mainstage Center for the Arts: A Self-sustaining Show Choir



Harmony Show Choir is an auditioned group of between 40 and 52 high-school-aged performers from the Southern New Jersey area. Unlike most show choirs, which are connected to their school districts, Harmony is connected to the Mainstage Center for the Arts, which seeks to provide a creative environment for youth and adults in order to enrich the lives of Jersey residents. Not only does Mainstage Center for the Arts pride itself on offering opportunities for those who enjoy the arts experience—as both audience members and participants—but also on developing creative expression as a component of education for both children and adults.

Mainstage Center for the Arts began in 1989 when Ed Fiscella, then a middle school teacher in Gloucester Township, was prompted to create a summer-long theater program. With the help of his fellow educator Joseph Bretschneider, the Board of Education, and the Department of Recreation, Fiscella developed “Summer Stage.” The success of the summer theater program was so overwhelming that it led to year-round arts programming for their community. Soon thereafter, Fiscella and his peers decided to incorporate as a 501 (c) (3) private non-profit.

Once they realized participants were not limited to Gloucester Township, and were indeed from all over the South Jersey

area, they rebranded as “Mainstage Center for the Arts.” Now, Mainstage's yearly programming reaches over fifty thousand audience members and serves over one thousand children through workshops and other outreach. Funded through grants, sponsorships, memberships and contributions, Mainstage relies in part on financial support through funding from the New Jersey State Council on the Arts.

HARMONY SHOW CHOIR

Mainstage's primary show choir, Harmony, is professionally staged and choreographed in a family-oriented revue that contains a mix of styles, including—but not limited to—Broadway, oldies, Disney, gospel, country, pop, and swing.

For the last four years, they have opened and closed for the Southwest Airlines Welcome America Parade. In Orlando, they have graced the Magic Kingdom's Galaxy Theatre, Epcot's American Gardens Theatre, Universal's City Walk, and Downtown Disney. In Nashville, they have performed at the Grand Ol' Opry, Wild Horse Saloon and Country Tonight; in Pigeon Forge, they were featured at Dollywood and the Dixie Stampede. In a trip to Canada, visitors to The Hard Rock Café and Canadian National Tower were treated to their music. They have graced multiple performance venues all

over Philadelphia: Veteran's Stadium, Girl Scouts National Convention, and The Gallery. In addition to landing gigs at a number of malls in Philadelphia and New Jersey, they have also performed in Atlantic City's Caesar's Palladium Ballroom.

They also have Encore, a 40-member instructional show choir for middle school students who need to hone their skills in dance, vocals, and performance. Encore is focused on music education and teaching the basics of song, dance, and performance to younger choir members. This beginner show choir gives younger members time to build confidence and focus on their talents before they face the pressure of performances. Fiscella adds, "After three years in Encore, they are seasoned performers."

To this day, Harmony is only one of two or three show choirs in the area. As such, they attract a pool of incredibly talented candidates from all over the South Jersey area. As Fiscella notes, Mainstage provides "an opportunity that doesn't exist" otherwise, giving young people the chance to express themselves through music and dance, while also representing their various towns and cities.



STARTING FROM SCRATCH

In the 80s, show choir was unheard of in many parts of the country. As Fiscella and his peers became more familiar with the world of show choir, they realized competitions would be difficult, with no other choirs in their area, so they chose instead to be "all about entertainment."

They asked members of the Young Americans to help them get started. Founded over fifty years ago in Hollywood,



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the Young Americans is a charitable organization dedicated to music, dance, and academic education. They are typically recognized as the world's first show choir.

Mainstage later modeled their efforts on the way Young Americans worked

for a few days with a group of kids and then performed together; in fact, today's Harmony members train younger kids—those from local middle schools—and put on a show after the training. Not only is the experience beneficial for the show choir members and the younger

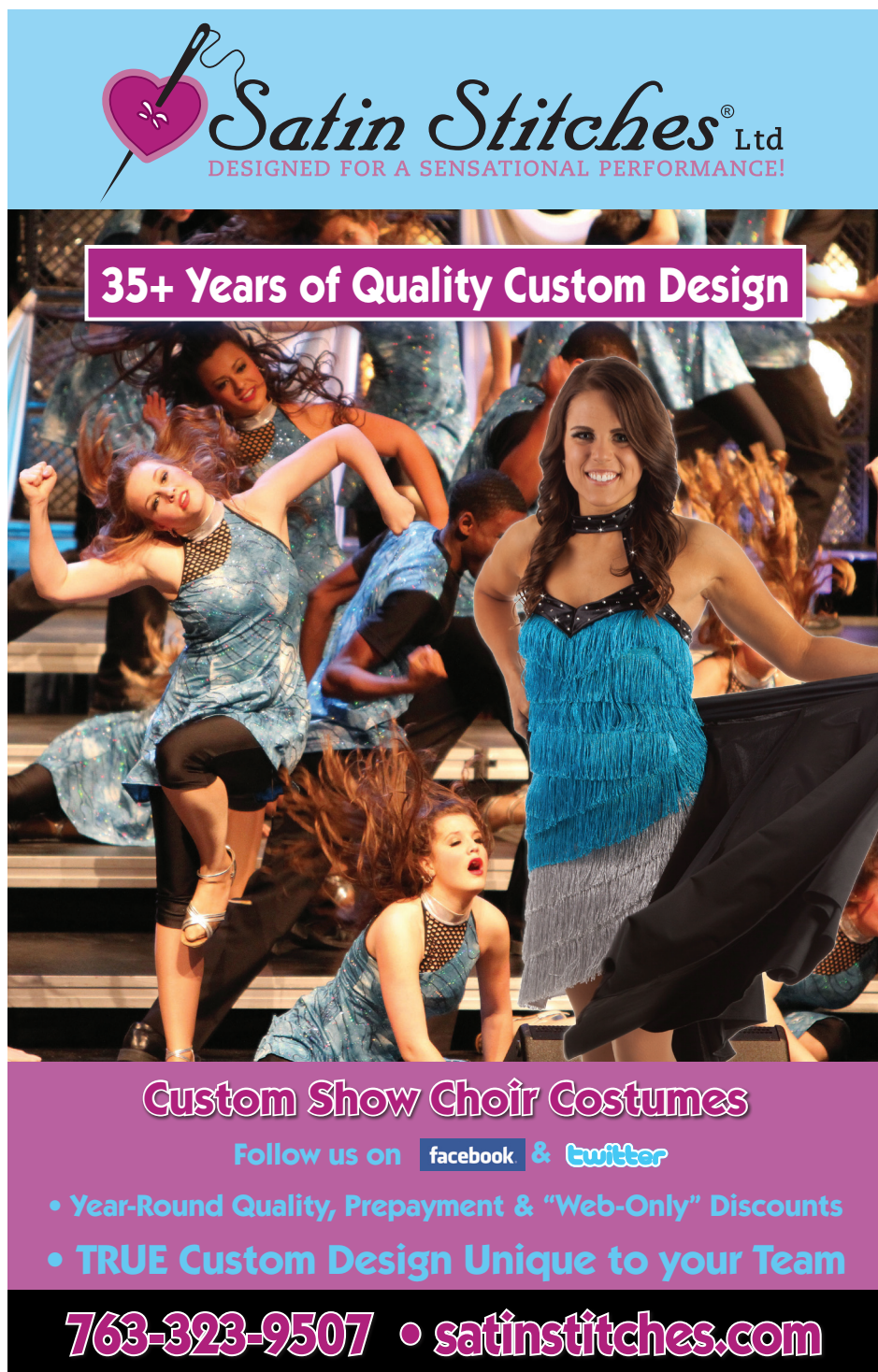
students, but the workshop becomes a fundraiser for the school or the school's music association.

Because the choir is not connected to school district funding, Show Choir participants pay a registration fee that covers the staff salaries. When they perform, group leaders work to secure a fee or stipend, though they do not have a set fee; instead, they generally trust people to pay what they can afford. For instance, one location may have a thousand dollars or more budgeted for entertainment, while a nursing home may have only one hundred dollars to spend. The larger jobs help cover the costs of the smaller jobs, in the way of sound technicians, bus rentals, and other travel expenses.

As Producing Artistic Director for Mainstage Center for the Arts, Fiscella has run the program for decades now, but just recently he has taken on administrative duties so the directors can focus on the planning of the show. He was able to “turn a lot of the managing of the show choir over to them” and let budding directors Katie Keith and Evan Figueras determine the program, outfits, and staging.

Because Fiscella has thirty-three years as a middle school teacher, he brings a wealth of experience for all facets of student management and administrative delegations. He knows Figueras and Keith will need time to develop those tools, and he is there to provide guidance as those administrative components are developed. Already, though, Fiscella notes that the “performances have never been better.”

He also provides advice that can only come from experience. For instance, popular wisdom might suggest a smaller choir would make things easier—more manageable in a number of ways. However, because this is an extracurricular activity, and these



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students are involved in other shows and activities through their high schools, there are some points in the year where they might be lucky to have ten students available for a performance. For instance, recently the Miss America pageant asked Mainstage to perform for a publicity event, and their goal was to "fill in the boardwalk with kids." That's hard to do if only a quarter of your team can commit to a particular day.

Additionally, there are also challenges regarding staging, when elaborate group numbers are planned but the number of performers available is limited. If a similar group were being developed, Fiscella encourages directors to create several small-group numbers rather than assuming every member should be in every piece. Not only does that allow more flexibility when planning a show

with smaller groups, but that also helps the show to have variety in presentation rather than "an hour of entertainment that all looks the same."

PASSING THE TORCH

Katie Keith is a professional theatre artist in the South Jersey and Philadelphia area with a BFA in acting. As the Program Director and Choreographer for Harmony Show Choir, Keith is in her fourth year developing the Harmony show choir program.

Because she was a Harmony member fourteen years ago, she is fully aware of the group's history and the possibilities for what the group can become. Keith recognizes that the program allows group members to develop their dance skills and vocal abilities, while they also learn to work as an ensemble. "They

are a part of a group that is bigger than just one individual," Keith notes, "and together they are able to perform intricate choreography and create beautiful harmonies that cannot be accomplished on their own."

Keith also shares that training students to think of themselves as one part of a team can be difficult. "Leading students to realize that the group is more important than the individual can be a really tricky task," Keith notes. "It is hard for some members to not grasp for the spotlight and for other members to come out of the shadows." However, when she sees her high school students all working to support each other, and using that passion to be the best group they can be, any struggles are forgotten.

In his third year with the group as Co-director and Music Director, professional




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musician and teacher Evan Figueras finds his favorite part of working with the teens of Harmony is that they “have truly begun to operate as a unit.” Like Keith, he recognizes one of the most significant struggles in building a community is that some love the spotlight and push for solos, while others may have “talent ready to bloom but either haven’t realized it yet or may be afraid to step out of their shell.” The trick, for the directors, is in helping spread the focus for group members. He and Keith don’t want anyone too heavily focused on individual opportunities to shine. Instead, they “emphasize the ensemble in every rehearsal or workshop we teach.”

In fact, Figueras adds that since they started encouraging members to assist each other with auditions for solos and features, they noticed a drop in the fiercely competitive angle when students shifted their focus to providing support, feedback, and encouragement. He adds, “They help one another prepare and share in the successes and disappointments. For me, watching a member positively influence those around them has been what brings me back week after week.”

He is also proud when students come in prepared, particularly when they made time to work on their numbers and socialize



with one another during the week to build the team. He adds, “We have tried very hard from day one to create an environment where each member felt comfortable with each other but also began to see their fellow choir members as family.” Because the kids are from multiple cities, he knows how important it is that they spend time together as colleagues and friends.

Coming from a strong choral background, Figueras is aware of the importance in working as an ensemble to build a team.

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He adds, "An ensemble is only at its best when each member is working together, and we have tried our best to lead the members in that direction." He's seen the group members realize that as they foster their sense of community, they better ensure their success.


ADVICE FOR STARTING A NON-PROFIT SHOW CHOIR

For anyone considering starting a similar program, Keith would urge program developers to "listen and be adaptable" because "times change, students change, and audiences change." Because she recognizes that all of those elements work together to ensure a program's success, Keith notes how important it is to listen to the students and parents, understanding what is working for them.

Equally important, Keith shares, is to have a staff that works well together and trusts each other—with each member doing his or her part to reach the same goals. "Unity in the staff will bring unity to the members," she explains.

Though three quarters of their group is consistent from one year to the next, this shift means one quarter of the group

changes with the calendar. As Figueras explains, "Any addition or subtraction influences the group in a different way." Thus, staff members must stay flexible and listen to members, parents, and audiences. He adds, "There have been various things that we have tried that have gone over great with everyone, but there are also times when things don't work." As a result, Figueras encourages anyone thinking about starting a similar group to be unafraid when it comes to re-evaluating policies or materials, even mid-year, if things aren't working as they should. He also believes that the way directors approach a bad rehearsal is equally important to the way directors approach good rehearsals.

Finally, Keith knows that directors must focus on the audience as an integral part of any successful arts program. She knows they must consider what an audience will be drawn to—what will excite them and "create a wonderful circle of giving." Ultimately, she believes an audience's enjoyment of a show leads to the positive energy that electrifies performers and staff, making the show choir members and staff feel they have accomplished their goals. She knows an audience left wanting more is the "best thank you a hardworking staff can receive." 

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