

One Voice Builds Bridges with East Side Saint Paul School

During a brainstorming session with One Voice chorus members several years ago, Artistic Director Jane Ramseyer Miller asked chorus members what kinds of performances would enhance the chorus mission of building community and creating social change. One response from members was clear: we need to take our message of tolerance and acceptance into public schools.

On April 22, One Voice will spend the day singing in schools across the metro area. In addition to performing music about justice, tolerance and acceptance, One Voice is working with OutFront Minnesota to train a team of non-singing volunteers who will assist teachers with classroom discussions following the concerts.

"Our concerts in schools always generate plenty of conversations among students," said Miller, "but this will be the first time we will take the next step and provide resources for discussion within classrooms." This kind of outreach exacts a real commitment from singers, most of whom will take the day off work to sing in the schools. "Taking a vacation day to participate in this kind of social change is not even an issue," said soprano Cheryl Winch. "If I had experienced a gay choir singing in my school as a youth, my whole coming out experience would have been different."

The day concludes with a special **collaboration concert with the Community of Peace Academy**, a charter school on the East Side of St. Paul. The school, which draws mostly from Hmong, African American and Hispanic communities, has a strong music program. John Sorlien, Assistant Music Director for One Voice and veteran teacher, offers music for grades K-12 including music theory and history, Orff and recorder ensembles and several choirs. "Community of Peace Academy was founded with a mission of peace and justice, which includes tolerance and a positive regard for all people," said Sorlien. "This collaboration is a perfect next step in moving toward those goals within the school."

Miller believes that collaboration works when people make real connections with one another. So Dr. Karen Rusthoven, Community of Peace Academy's principal, invited John Sorlien and Ramseyer Miller to tell their coming out stories to high school students. "I was nervous," Miller said, "John was terrified. After all, he had to show up for school the next day with these students". But the speech to the student body went well. Students were respectful, engaged and enthusiastic about the idea of a collaboration concert with One Voice. In fact, within a week, twenty-eight new students had signed up to audition for the Academy Choir and participate in the concert.

"In working with these students, I wanted to create something concrete together," said Miller, "so we decided to commission a piece of music for our two choirs." With a grant from the American Composer's Forum, One Voice commissioned St. Paul composer Elizabeth Alexander to compose a song especially for One Voice and the school's Academy Choir. Alexander worked with students to generate the text for the piece. "I began with images of life as a garden and asked the students to write

about what that might look like,” said Alexander. The process was going well until one student remarked candidly, “I don’t think life is like a garden at all”. Students talked about the pressures and struggles of life as a young adult in the Twin Cities. “I didn’t want to go in this direction at all,” said Alexander, “but as the conversation progressed I knew it was exactly right for this commission.”

The piece, now titled “Life is *Not* a Garden”, will premier on Friday, April 22 at a 2:30 pm concert for the student body. The Academy Choir and One Voice will then perform a free evening concert for the public at 7:00 pm at Dayton Avenue Presbyterian Church in St. Paul. The concert will feature individual sets from each chorus, a performance by the Community of Peace Academy staff choir and several combined numbers including Paul Simon’s “Bridge Over Troubled Water” and a tribute to today’s youth, “We Rise Again”. Come join us for this free concert. Families, children and youth are especially welcome.



Jane Ramseyer Miller, John Sorlien and Elizabeth Alexander rehearse with the Academy Choir from Community of Peace Academy.