

Quest for Musical Excellence

The Story of the Ambassadors of Harmony

You are standing on a set of risers; your heart is pounding. The crowd starts to chant “A-O-H,” “A-O-H.” The announcement begins ... “Representing the Central States District ...” The rest is muffled by the crowd cheering in anticipation of 160 men who are about to perform two songs. Suddenly, the curtain rises and you are greeted by a sea of people and a set of tables where there are seated fifteen men about to judge your performance. The two songs go by quickly. Then, at the last chord of the last song, the crowd suddenly gets out of their seats and cheers and claps. The curtain falls and the cheering eventually dies down. You catch your breath as you walk off the stage. This was my experience when I first competed with the Ambassadors of Harmony in 2004 at the International Barbershop Convention in Louisville, Kentucky. This was the first gold medal earned by the Ambassadors of Harmony; but the road to gold at the International Barbershop Convention and the quest for musical excellence had many twists and turns.

The Ambassadors of Harmony is the St. Charles Chapter of the Barbershop Harmony Society. The BHS was originally founded in 1938 as the Society for the Preservation and Encouragement of Barber Shop Quartet Singing in America, Inc. (S.P.E.B.S.Q.S.A.), which is still the legal name of the society.¹ Prior to the formation of the current barbershop chapter in St. Charles, attempts had been made to bring barbershop music to the area. In 1950, the St. Louis and Clayton chapters of S.P.E.B.S.Q.S.A. traveled to St. Charles to present a barbershop music program for local residents.² In 1958, St. Charles resident Ted Huesemann attended the formation of the North County chapter. The *St. Charles Daily Banner-News* reported concerning the society, “Many of its members have little or no formal music training but sing strictly by ear.” At the time, it was anticipated a local chapter would form.³ However, it would be another five years before barbershop music would arrive to stay in St. Charles. The chapter was founded in 1963, when a call went forth with the colorful introductory statement: “Calling all bathtub baritones.” The first meeting of the new Daniel Boone Chorus occurred 22 January 1963.⁴ The new chorus, under the direction of Gordon Manion, participated in a barbershop recognition program as part of International Harmony Week on the radio stations KADY 1460 AM and KADI-FM 96.5 on 21 April 1963.⁵ The official presentation of the chorus’ charter was on 25 April 1964 at St. Charles High School. The Daniel Boone Chorus initially met on Wednesday evenings at 8:15 p.m. at the American Legion Hall at Third and Washington streets.⁶ The new chapter performed several times in St. Charles in its early years. For example, it performed for the St. Charles Community Council on 19 May 1966.⁷ The earliest mention of an installation dinner that I found was at Elm Point Steak House in 1968.⁸

¹ <http://www.barbershop.org/26-men-on-a-roof.html>

² “Four SPEBSQSA Quartets Here Monday Evening,” *St. Charles Banner-News*, 17 March 1950

³ “SPEBSQSA?,” *St. Charles Daily Banner-News*, 26 May 1958

⁴ <http://www.aoh.org/charter/charterinvite.htm>

⁵ “Barbershop Chorus Formed,” *St. Charles Journal*, 18 April 1963

⁶ <http://www.aoh.org/charter/index.htm>; *St. Charles Journal*, 27 February 1964

⁷ “Comm. Council Installation,” *St. Charles Journal*, 19 May 1966

⁸ Ruth Harlan, “Social Notes,” *St. Charles Journal*, 15 February 1968

The chorus continues to hold an annual installation dinner each January at the Heart of St. Charles Banquet Center in St. Charles.

The Daniel Boone Chorus went through several directors, including Bob Henry and Gordon Manion, who was the first director.⁹ Henry's sons Rob and Jim both played pivotal roles in the musical growth of the St. Charles chapter. Jim Henry wrote a letter petitioning the chapter to join as an eleven-year-old in 1975.¹⁰ At the time Jim joined the chorus, attendance averaged about twenty-five men who rehearsed sitting down.¹¹ By this time, the chorus was competing in local area competitions and finished in second place in the St. Louis Area Chorus Competition in 1970.¹² The Daniel Boone Chorus began to compete in the annual Central States District Chorus Contest. The chorus typically finished toward the bottom of the list, placing tenth in 1972, eleventh in 1973, ninth in 1975, and eleventh again in 1978 and 1979. The eleventh place finish in 1979 was last place.¹³ The chorus held a guest night in 1973 at St. John United Church of Christ in St. Charles.¹⁴ The Daniel Boone Chorus began performing annual spring shows in the 1970s. They performed on 17-18 May 1974 at St. Charles High School. The previous two shows offered by the chorus were sellouts.¹⁵ In 1976, the chorus consisted of forty-five singers. Their guest night that year was at the Olde Tyme Barbershop, 501 South Fifth Street in St. Charles.¹⁶ In 1977, they began to annually serve up music, food, and beer at the Festival of the Little Hills.¹⁷ The chorus maintained its presence at the festival until 2002.

In 1981 David Wright, a mathematics professor from Washington University in St. Louis, joined the chorus, became its director, and immediately began making changes.¹⁸ Wright had previously directed a barbershop chorus in St. Louis for five years before coming to the Daniel Boone Chorus.¹⁹ Jim Henry described what happened as a result: "Then something incredible happened that changed everything. It stirred us like a tornado. Its name was David Wright. David came to us with a vision that the Daniel Boone Chorus could actually become a great singing ensemble, and immediately began to raise the level of expectations. He made the chorus stand up to rehearse. A few guys quit in protest. He instituted auditions in order to become a member. A few more guys quit in protest. For every change David made, people quit."²⁰ In spite of those who quit over the changes Wright made, the chorus grew in numbers. Within two years the chorus had grown to seventy members and was rehearsing on Tuesday nights at the St. Charles

⁹ Jim Henry in acceptance speech in Louisville, Kentucky, 4 July 2004 (on Youtube)

¹⁰ Joel Currier, "The Biggest Man in Barbershop," *The Harmonizer* (May/June 2010), 18

¹¹ <http://harmonyuniversity.blogspot.com/2007/08/gold-medal-moments-by-dr.html>

¹² "SPEBSQSA Champs," *St. Charles Journal*, 8 October 1970

¹³ http://www.barbershopwiki.com/wiki/Ambassadors_of_Harmony

¹⁴ "Singing Offered by SPEBSQSA at St. John's," *St. Charles Journal*, 26 February 1973

¹⁵ "Daniel Boone Chorus Second in Districts," *St. Charles Journal*, 9 May 1974

¹⁶ "Singers Wanted," *St. Charles Journal*, 19 May 1976; Esther Talbot Fenning, "Bill Bohrer: Barbershop Extraordinaire," *St. Charles Post*, 9 January 1995

¹⁷ Esther Talbot Fenning, "Festival of the Little Hills – Cooks Again on Riverfront," *St. Charles Post*, 10 August 1995; see also Dennis Miller, "St. Charles Open House: It's Festival Time Again!" *St. Charles Journal*, 16 August 1979

¹⁸ <http://www.aoh.org/davidwright.html>; "Daniel Boone Chorus Blazes Trail of Fun and Friendship," *St. Charles Post*, 8 June 1983

¹⁹ "Daniel Boone Chorus Blazes Trail of Fun and Friendship," *St. Charles Post*, 8 June 1983

²⁰ <http://harmonyuniversity.blogspot.com/2007/08/gold-medal-moments-by-dr.html>

Presbyterian Church.²¹ The changes showed immediate results in 1982, with a second-place finish in the district contest. The chorus fell back to sixth in 1983, but rose again to second in 1984, then fourth in 1985, third in 1986, and third in 1987. The chorus won its first district championship in 1988.²² In 1989, the Daniel Boone Chorus made its International Barbershop Chorus Competition debut in Kansas City, Missouri, with seventy-seven men on the risers and finished in sixth place.²³

Wright handed the directorship to Jim Henry in 1990, shortly after competing at international.²⁴ Wright later commented, "I spent a decade where we weren't even good enough to go to the championship."²⁵ Looking back on his time as director, Wright stated, "We struggled through times when it [the chorus] wasn't very good and the level of singing just wasn't there."²⁶ Concerning the change in directors, Henry stated, "David was like 'you can take it farther than I can take it.'" By that time, Jim Henry had served a stint as the director of a Sweet Adelines chorus while an undergraduate student at Southeast Missouri State University in Cape Girardeau and was also an assistant director of the Daniel Boone Chorus.²⁷

Although many changes had been instituted, one more was made in the summer of 1991. The Daniel Boone Chorus gave its last performance at the Olde Tyme Picnic in St. Peters on 20 July 1991.²⁸ "The Daniel Boone Chorus did not quite carry the image we were beginning to develop for ourselves," said Henry. One of the influences for the name change was the man in charge of marketing the Vocal Majority, a perennial international barbershop chorus champion headquartered in Dallas, Texas. The marketing person looked at the name "Daniel Boone Chorus" and said that it brought forth the image of men who dressed up in buckskins and sang prairie songs.²⁹ So, the music committee chose a new name for the St. Charles Chapter of the S.P.E.B.S.Q.S.A., Inc.: the Ambassadors of Harmony. The chorus gave its first performance under the new name on 17 August 1991 at the Festival of the Little Hills in St. Charles.³⁰

In 1992 the Munny asked the Ambassadors to provide some men to be a part of their production of "South Pacific". About 50 men took part, dressing as sailors and joining in several songs. This was the first of six Munny appearances, including "South Pacific" again in 1997 and 2003, "Oklahoma" in 1993, and "White Christmas" in 2000 and 2006.³¹ The Ambassadors of Harmony returned to the International Barbershop

²¹ "Daniel Boone Chorus Blazes Trail of Fun and Friendship," *St. Charles Post*, 8 June 1983

²² http://www.barbershopwiki.com/wiki/Ambassadors_of_Harmony

²³ "Spotlight," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, 26 July 1989

²⁴ <http://www.aoh.org/davidwright.html>

²⁵ Jason Lee, "Ambassadors Have Top Voices," *St. Charles Journal*, 11 July 2004

²⁶ Joel Currier, "Open Wide and Say 'A-O-H,'" *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, 6 August 2004

²⁷ Joel Currier's interview of Jim Henry, <http://www.barbershop.org/the-harmonizer/the-harmonizer-mayjune-2010.html>

²⁸ Oberle-DeGroodt, "Olde Tyme Fun: Town Gearing Up for 3-Day Picnic," *St. Charles Post*, 18 July 1991 (A separate Daniel Boone Chorus briefly existed in 1994)

²⁹ Joel Currier's interview of Jim Henry in 2010, available online at <http://www.barbershop.org/the-harmonizer/the-harmonizer-mayjune-2010.html>

³⁰ Esther Talbot Fenning, "Caning Craft Featured at Festival of the Little Hills This Weekend," *St. Charles Post*, 15 August 1991

³¹ Judith Newmark, "At the Munny, Bigger Is Better," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, 11 June 2000; Newmark, "Sky's the Limit for This 'South Pacific,'" *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, 6 August 2003; Newmark, "'Christmas' In July Entertains at the Munny," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, 26 July 2006

Chorus Competition in Calgary, Alberta, Canada, on 3 July 1993.³² In 1994, the 106-man Ambassadors of Harmony finished fourth in the International Barbershop Chorus Competition in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.³³ The number of men in the chorus dropped from 106 to ninety-eight by the time the Ambassadors won district again in the fall of 1994.³⁴ The Ambassadors, consisting of 142 men, competed again at the International Barbershop Chorus Competition in Miami, Florida, in 1995.³⁵ The chorus earned 2,761 points, finishing in third place.³⁶ There were 141 men in the performing chorus in 1996, when they finished third at international in Salt Lake City, Utah.³⁷ Jim Prince, then a resident of Idaho, attended the International Barbershop Chorus Convention that year. He was contemplating moving already; but when he heard the Ambassadors of Harmony sing, he decided to move to St. Louis and join the chorus.³⁸

In 1997, the Ambassadors of Harmony was, according to chorus member Michael Kunz, “mostly a bunch of regular guys.” “We joined the chorus the way most barbershoppers do. Somebody had invited us.”³⁹ The chorus finished third again at international in Indianapolis, this time with 132 men on the risers.⁴⁰ Jonathan “Jonny” Moroni attended one of the chorus’ Christmas concerts that winter and decided to leave the high school hockey team at Westminster Christian Academy in St. Louis and join the Ambassadors. Kunz wrote concerning Moroni, “Over the next several years, he got the nickname Jonny ‘One More-oni’ because he always wanted to sing ‘one more’ tag. His enthusiasm and involvement with many ... high school and college singers gave AOH a youthful aspect that invigorated the whole chorus.”⁴¹ Moroni later became an associate director and co-director. The Ambassadors finished in third place again at the 1998 International Chorus Competition in Atlanta, Georgia. There were 129 on the risers.⁴² The Ambassadors finished fourth at the 1999 International Chorus Competition in Anaheim, California. There were only ninety on the risers.⁴³ The number of men on the risers was 110 by the end of 1999.⁴⁴ Also in 1999, the Ambassadors of Harmony traveled to Ireland and performed in Killarney, Ireland. Jim Henry stepped down as director during that year and became associate director. He was replaced by David Wright, who had been associate director. Henry needed the time off to focus on finishing his Ph.D. in music composition, which he received the following year from Washington University of St. Louis. He later commented that just before “the year 2000, I remember I was

³² “Barbershop Chorus to Compete in Contest in Calgary, Alberta,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, 28 June 1993

³³ “Barbershop Chorus Finishes 4th in World Contest,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, 20 July 1994; “Spotlight,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, 19 August 1994

³⁴ “Mid-America Roundup,” *Kansas City Star*, 3 October 1994

³⁵ Matthew S. Bennett, “Sweet Harmonies Keep Families in Tune,” *The Deseret News* (Salt Lake City, UT), 6 July 1996

³⁶ Bennett, “Golden Voices: Masters of Harmony and Nightlife Croon Their Winning Tunes in S.L.,” *The Deseret News*, 7 July 1996

³⁷ Michael Kunz, “Hearts of Gold,” *The Harmonizer* (November/December 2004), 11

³⁸ *Ibid*, 13

³⁹ *Ibid*, 11

⁴⁰ “Dallas, Ohio Singers Win Barbershop Competition; St. Charles Group Third,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, 7 July 1997

⁴¹ Kunz, 12

⁴² http://www.barbershopwiki.com/wiki/Ambassadors_of_Harmony

⁴³ “Winners Get Acclaim and Title of World’s Best – But No Cash,” *The Orange County Register*, 4 June 1999

⁴⁴ “Fine Arts – Performance,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, 30 December 1999

becoming very competition-driven. I got angry if they made the same mistake too many times. I was just a whole different person.”⁴⁵ Henry said in 2007, “I went through a low period as a director when that [the gold medal] was all that mattered to me. And little by little I started losing my joy. And the chorus suffered for it. Then one day the apple fell off the tree and conked me in the head. I had a revelation: It’s the JOURNEY, stupid, not the destination!”⁴⁶ With Henry back as assistant director, he had “the time to soul-search” and he came up with a new philosophy: singing for the sake of creating art.⁴⁷

Under David Wright, the chorus finished sixth in the International Chorus Competition in Kansas City, Missouri in 2000.⁴⁸ Later in 2000, Jim Henry once again became director of the Ambassadors of Harmony. With the new philosophy of singing to create musical art, Henry began to win converts to his new vision. Looking back at the time he changed his philosophy from winning international to “let’s do it for the art’s sake,” Henry stated, “... I tried something else and it failed miserably. It made me a horrible person. Knowing that made me so much stronger in my philosophy; it’s been nothing but a joy ever since.”⁴⁹ At the beginning of 2001, the chorus consisted of one hundred men.⁵⁰ David Wright produced a new composition “The Toy Song” to be coupled with “Toyland” for the chorus’ 2001 contest set. Michael Kunz recalled in 2004, “We found, as we looked within us for those special childlike feelings that the songs convey, that we were moving our audiences in ways we had never expected.” Part of the creation of musical art was the new goal of changing lives for the better.⁵¹ This philosophy of changing lives carried into each and every performance from then on.

To further aid in the chorus’ striving for excellence, various individuals were brought in to coach the chorus on aspects of performing. Bob and Rosemary Calderon flew in from El Paso, Texas, to create choreography packages for the chorus’ up tunes. Greg Clancy of the Vocal Majority in Dallas, Texas, “taught us to sing tall and forward, with beauty and lift,” wrote Kunz. Jay Giallombardo of the New Tradition Chorus in Northbrook, Illinois, “taught us the value of singing with beautifully round vowels and unit sound.”⁵² The Ambassadors competed at the International Barbershop Chorus Competition in Portland, Oregon, in July 2002 and finished fourth.⁵³ On 3 November 2002, the Ambassadors of Harmony performed on “From the Garden Live!”⁵⁴ “From the Garden Live!” was a semi-annual concert series put on at the Schoenberg Auditorium at the Missouri Botanical Garden by KFUE-FM, Classic 99.1.

That Sunday, I came home from Kirk of the Hills, where I was serving as a music intern, and turned on the radio. The host, Jim Connett, was interviewing the director of the chorus, Jim Henry. After the interview segment ended, music began to float through the speakers of the radio and fill the room. At first it was just one voice, a solo. Then, out of nowhere, came this a cappella sound that was so moving and enthralling. The song was Ralph Vaughan Williams’ arrangement of “Loch Lomond.” The soloist was Eric

⁴⁵ Currier, 19-20

⁴⁶ <http://harmonyuniversity.blogspot.com/2007/08/gold-medal-moments-by-dr.html>

⁴⁷ Currier, 19-20

⁴⁸ http://www.barbershopwiki.com/wiki/Ambassadors_of_Harmony

⁴⁹ Currier, 20

⁵⁰ “Pop (Music Listings),” 1 February 2001

⁵¹ Kunz, 12

⁵² Kunz, 12

⁵³ http://www.barbershopwiki.com/wiki/Ambassadors_of_Harmony

⁵⁴ “Fine Arts,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, 31 October 2002

Dalbey, a college student from Lindenwood University who was the lead for Vocal Spectrum, one of the quartets from the Ambassadors. I don't remember all the songs the chorus sang that day, but I remember wanting to join immediately. However, I decided to put off becoming a member of the Ambassadors until after I finished my studies at Missouri Baptist University.

In the summer of 2003, the Ambassadors traveled to Montreal for international. They had a new set, featuring "Shine" and "Just a Kid Named Joe," both arrangements by David Wright. Kunz recalled, "The day before we competed in Montreal, Jay Giallombardo listened to us rehearse 'Just a Kid Named Joe' and he was moved to speechless tears."⁵⁵ One chorus member who could not go with the Ambassadors to Montreal was bass section leader Rob Henry, brother of Jim Henry and baritone of the Gas House Gang, another quartet. Rob was diagnosed with esophageal cancer and was forced to watch the contest via the internet from his hospital bed. Once again, the Ambassadors of Harmony finished third with 120 men on the risers.⁵⁶ Jim called his brother to report the news and Rob predicted that the chorus would win in 2004.⁵⁷ "Just a Kid Named Joe" was labeled the song of the 2003 chorus contest.⁵⁸ The first rehearsal I attended was in August 2003. By this time, I had discovered that I needed to attend three rehearsals and learn "I'd Love to Live in Loveland," the song every man who wanted to audition had to sing. If I fulfilled all the requirements, I would be able to audition 4 September 2003. I came to rehearsal that night ready, but no auditions were held due to the death of Robert E. Henry, Jr.⁵⁹ Kunz opined in the light of Rob Henry's passing, "A true test of any family or group that functions like a family is how it responds to loss and sorrow." The chorus continued to support Rob Henry during his final days and performed at his funeral. "We knew that we were there for each other, both on and off the risers."⁶⁰ Even a local reporter noticed that "the group is close-knit and its camaraderie could be seen Monday at the funeral of Robert E. Henry, Jr. – the group's section leader and brother of director Jim Henry."⁶¹ Rob Henry's death gave me another week to prepare the audition song. On 11 September, I passed "the Loveland audition." The Ambassadors were featured in an article on that date. By the time I joined in September, Henry had set a new goal, "We should never sing as badly as we did in Montreal."⁶² In another month I was riser qualified and I officially became a member of the Ambassadors of Harmony 13 October 2003.

Henry compared the Ambassadors to two other choruses, "The one advantage choruses like the Vocal Majority and the Toronto Northern Lights had over us was that they formed to be awesome. Our chorus formed to be friendly ... there was that mindset that we're not real champions. We'd say it, but in our heart of hearts, that belief that we were capable of winning an international took the longest time." As a result of the reaction to "Just a Kid Named Joe" and because they had the best score of any of the

⁵⁵ Kunz, 13

⁵⁶ http://www.barbershopwiki.com/wiki/BHS_Intl_Chorus_Contest_2003

⁵⁷ Kunz, 13; Jim Henry, acceptance speech, Louisville, Kentucky, 4 July 2004

⁵⁸ John Sonderegger, "Three 'Prominent Members' of Community Will Take a Dive for Charity in Celebrity Dunk Tank," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, 8 August 2003

⁵⁹ Robert E. Henry, Jr. obituary, *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, 7 September 2003

⁶⁰ Kunz, 13

⁶¹ Adam Williams, "For Ambassadors, Harmony is Sweet, Discipline is Strict," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, 11 September 2003

⁶² *Ibid.*

district champions in the Barbershop Harmony Society in the fall of 2003, “the guys started carrying themselves differently,” observed the chorus’ director. “It was the spirit in the room when every man believes they’re champions.”⁶³ Yet, it seemed that the sense that the Ambassadors could win also flowed from the enthusiasm of Jim Henry, an enthusiasm which expressed itself in his interview with several University of Missouri-St. Louis music and choir students (including me) in May 2004. There he expressed with great delight that the chorus was on top of the list of choruses going into the 2004 International. In February 2004, KETC’s (Channel 9, PBS) “Living St. Louis” covered the Ambassadors of Harmony in St. Charles, Missouri, and Springfield, Illinois. “The goal,” said Jim Henry, “is to make this big chorus sound as clean and together as a quartet might sound.”⁶⁴ Jim Clancy, the director of the Vocal Majority until 2010, was flown in from Dallas, Texas, to coach the Ambassadors for their spring retreat in 2004. Shortly after the shows in Springfield, Illinois, a majority of the chorus embarked on a performance tour of Germany, Sweden, and the Netherlands in March 2004. The crowds that greeted the chorus treated them like champions. One member, David Schuler, recalled that “It was a key element into giving the chorus the confidence we needed to become champions. When we toured Europe that year, we were treated as champions and we realized that we were champions and therefore we started behaving like champions. The level of performance and attitude towards our craft changed for everyone on that trip and then carried back to the states as we moved forward towards the contest.”⁶⁵ More men continued to join the chorus throughout the year. “Another guest night and perhaps just word-of-mouth swelled our ranks into the 140s and then the 150s. This time around at the international contest we decided to forego colorful theme costumes. We would instead wear our new tuxedos and just stand up and ‘sing the snot’ out of our contest set, as Greg Clancy would put it.”⁶⁶ The chorus continued to grow in numbers and improve. Finally, the ranks swelled to 160 men.

The time soon came for my first competition with the Ambassadors of Harmony, the International Chorus Competition in Louisville, Kentucky, 3 July 2004. My family traveled with me as we made the drive down Interstates 70 and 64 to Louisville. We attended everything we possibly could. We wanted the full experience. We were in the audience when Vocal Spectrum set records in the Collegiate Quartet Contest. We were there for the International Quartet Contest. Just prior to stepping on the risers, “Jim told us that we could take all our nervousness and pour it into him ... ‘When you get out on that stage, it’s just you and me.’”⁶⁷ On 3 July 2004, the 160 men of the Ambassadors of Harmony presented “I Have Dreamed” and “The New Ashmolean Marching Society and Students’ Conservatory Band.” The performance ended and the audience jumped out of their seats and applauded. We went to our assigned seats and watched the rest of the choruses. The last chorus performed and we waited. The Vocal Majority sang their swan song set and then it was time for the announcement. I held my breath as they announced each chorus from fifth place on up. “In second place, from Toronto ...” The people,

⁶³ Currier, 19

⁶⁴ “Ambassadors of Harmony” episode, “Living St. Louis, KETC Channel 9 (PBS), St. Louis, Missouri, February 2004, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FgM3pjcQ0cU>

⁶⁵ David Schuler in e-mail, 6 September 2013; I was not able to go on the trip due to my graduate studies at the University of Missouri-St. Louis

⁶⁶ Kunz, 13

⁶⁷ Kunz, 11

including several chorus members, around me erupted in cheering and applause. “It was pandemonium,” stated David Wright. “We were all sitting in the nosebleed section and it just erupted.”⁶⁸ The nosebleed section was Section 344 at Freedom Hall in Louisville.⁶⁹ The chorus performed sixth in the contest, so we had a long wait before the announcement.⁷⁰ I stood up just in time to see that a picture of our chorus was on the screen. We were the 2004 International Chorus Champions of the S.P.E.B.S.Q.S.A.!⁷¹ Kunz summed it up, “The Ambassadors of Harmony became a gold-medal chorus when we realized that it wasn’t all about winning a gold medal—it was about an attitude that creates gold-medal moments.”⁷² There were not enough gold medals to go around, so the Vocal Majority loaned eleven gold medals (including one from Greg Clancy: “I’ll give you this one for Rob”) to the Ambassadors for the acceptance set.⁷³ The 2004 Ambassadors of Harmony are, so far, the largest chorus to win the International Chorus Competition.

After the first gold medal, Jim Henry set a new goal: “creating the most meaningful and artistic music possible.” “We can only accomplish this goal effectively by being at the top of our form every time we put our feet on the risers, and then growing from there.”⁷⁴ A few weeks after the win in Louisville, the Ambassadors hosted a party and performance at the Foundry Arts Centre in St. Charles. Jim Henry announced another goal for the chorus to the *Post-Dispatch*: “to become the best barbershop chorus in history.”⁷⁵ The reporter from the *Post-Dispatch* that attended and reported on the Foundry Art Centre performance was Joel Currier. As a result of finding out about the Ambassadors of Harmony, Currier tried out for and joined the chorus!

The international champion chorus does not compete for two international conventions. Often, without this impetus, a chorus can become complacent. It can become difficult to continue to keep everyone committed to the vision of musical excellence. However, the Ambassadors showed no signs of letting up. Several members of the chorus flew to Salt Lake City, Utah, to perform as the 2004 gold medal chorus champions. The convention was held 4-10 July 2005. It was a busy convention complete with a master’s class, a performance on the Harmony Jamboree show, and a swan song set (featuring “Man of La Mancha”) while the judges were determining who would succeed the Ambassadors as International Chorus Champions. Some members stayed behind that Sunday and sang in the Gold Medal Chorus. The numbers on the risers remained strong throughout that year and into 2006.

While laying out of the international competition in 2006, the Ambassadors of Harmony traveled to Harrogate, United Kingdom (via a host of other destinations and a layover for some members) to perform for the British Association of Barbershop Singers (BABS) convention held 19-21 May. The audience treated us like rock stars as we crammed on to the risers and stood in a staggered formation as we performed seventeen

⁶⁸ Quoted in Jason Lee, “Ambassadors Have Top Voices,” *St. Peters Journal*, 11 July 2004

⁶⁹ Kunz, 11

⁷⁰ Jason Lee, “Ambassadors Have Top Voices,” *St. Peters Journal*, 11 July 2004

⁷¹ “Local Men Place First at World Chorus Contest,” *State Journal-Register* (Springfield, IL), 9 July 2004; John Sonderegger, “Word’s Out of a New News Venture in the Offing,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, 21 July 2004

⁷² Kunz, 11

⁷³ *Ibid.* and Jim Henry’s 2004 acceptance speech

⁷⁴ Kunz, 13

⁷⁵ Joel Currier, “Open Wide and Say ‘A-O-H,’” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, 6 August 2004

songs.

The next competition for the Ambassadors of Harmony was the Central States District Chorus Contest in October 2006. I competed with the chorus in my first Central States District Chorus Contest on 7 October 2006 in Wichita, Kansas.⁷⁶ There were 146 men on the stage and the chorus scored 1,680 points, 93.3%, the second highest percentage of all the district champions in the society that fall.⁷⁷ That evening, Jim Henry announced to the chorus, “Gents, I have good news and bad news. The good news is that we scored the highest score in the history of the Central States District. The bad news is that Westminster beat our score by eight points.” (The Westminster Chorus is a group of young men from Westminster, California.)

David Wright produced two new arrangements for the Ambassadors during the second half of 2006. The original set for the 2007 International was going to be “They Didn’t Believe Me” and “They All Laughed.” “They All Laughed” was later shelved and replaced with a new David Wright arrangement of “Fit as a Fiddle.” The Ambassadors took the set to Denver, Colorado. There, the chorus of 158 men tied the Westminster Chorus (both with 2,849 points or 95%), but Westminster won the singing category and thus was declared the winner. We later learned that Westminster had been penalized thirty points for a sixteen-bar phrase of choreography with no singing. Without the penalty, Westminster would have beaten us by those thirty points.⁷⁸ The Ambassadors, now 138 men, won the Central States District Chorus Competition on 20 October 2007 with a score of 1,678 or 93.2%. For the first time since the fall of 2003, AOH was on top of the list of choruses going into the following international convention. However, the second place Masters of Harmony of Santa Fe Springs, California, was only five points behind. The Masters of Harmony was the defending champion.⁷⁹ For the competition, David Wright introduced the chorus to a new arrangement of “Love Walked In” and a combination of “Get Me to the Church on Time” with “This Joint is Jumping.”⁸⁰ The chorus took these new arrangements and 164 men (a new record for the Ambassadors) to the International Barbershop Chorus Competition in Nashville, Tennessee. On 4 July 2008, the Masters of Harmony and the Ambassadors of Harmony competed back-to-back in the chorus competition. The Masters beat the Ambassadors by seven points (2,849 to 2,842) to win the contest.⁸¹ The Ambassadors continued to work on the songs they took to Nashville and performed them again during the Central States District Contest on 11 October 2008 in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. The chorus, with 133 men, repeated as Central States District Chorus Champions, this time earning 1,705 points (94.7%). This was a new record for the district and made the Ambassadors of Harmony the most improved Plateau AAA chorus in the district.⁸² The Ambassadors once again were number one on

⁷⁶ “Metro Digest: News From Around the Region,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, 10 October 2006

⁷⁷ <http://www.harmonize.ws/HarmonetReporter/scores/2006/Fall/Chorus/CSD06DCH.PDF>

⁷⁸ Judith Newmark, David Bonetti, Kevin C. Johnson, “Arts News Briefs,” 15 July 2007; “Entertainment Briefs,” *St. Charles Journal*, 17 August 2007

⁷⁹ <http://www.harmonize.ws/HarmonetReporter/scores/2007/Fall/Chorus/SUM07DCH.HTM>

⁸⁰ Amanda King, “Ambassadors of Harmony Go for A Cappella Gold in Nashville,” *St. Louis Beacon*, 3 July 2008

⁸¹ <http://www.harmonize.ws/HarmonetReporter/scores/2008/Intl/INT08FCH.pdf>; *Serenade* LV, no. 3 (August 2008); “Local Barbershop Singers Win Gold,” *The Orange County Register* (Santa Ana, CA), 9 July 2008; Amanda King, “Ambassadors of Harmony Take Second in International Competition,” *St. Louis Beacon*, 7 July 2008

⁸² <http://www.harmonize.ws/HarmonetReporter/scores/2008/Fall/Chorus/CSD08DCH.PDF>

the list of choruses in the society coming out of district.⁸³

The Ambassadors of Harmony performed at the Greater Alton Concert Association's concert series in Hatheway Hall in the Anne Whitney Olin Theatre at the Lewis and Clark Community College in Godfrey, Illinois, on 21 March 2009.⁸⁴ The chorus traveled to Anaheim, California, to compete again in the International Chorus Competition in 2009. This time, the competition included the Vocal Majority, a chorus which had not lost since 1978. The Vocal Majority came prepared to perform and set a new competition record in the morning session. Once again, we would have to wait until evening to compete. The announcement was made, the curtain opened. Jim Henry drew the entire attention of the chorus and then we began the ballad, "If You Love Me (Really Love Me)." When we reached the end, the audience gave us a standing ovation! Then with a twitch of his arms, Henry snapped the chorus into readiness for the up tune, "Seventy-Six Trombones." When we finished, we all knew we had put our best performance on that stage. A few more choruses were left, but the audience waited with bated breath to see who the judges said had won. The Masters of Harmony sang their swan song set and then the announcement came. The crowd gasped at the announcement of Toronto in fifth place with 2,706 points and a 90.2. The scores kept coming in; but our chorus had not yet been announced. Finally, second place ... we had been here before ... had we won or would we have to go through the process again next year? Then there was the announcement "in second place with a score of 2,889, a 96.3 average, Dallas Metro." I sat still, waiting to hear who had won. "The 2009 International Chorus Champion with 2,926 points, a 97.5 average—I believe that is a new chorus record—St. Charles, Missouri." There was a huge celebration in the area where I was seated. The record stood for one year, but remains the second highest score in the history of the chorus competition. We had once again won the competition, held on 3 July 2009, which was five years to the day of our previous competition win. The following day, the Ambassadors of Harmony teamed up with the Masters of Harmony and the Vocal Majority to perform on the Harmony Foundation show. It was the thrill of a lifetime.⁸⁵ The up-tune, "Seventy-Six Trombones," was uploaded to Youtube by the Barbershop Harmony Society. It has been watched over two million times since then. We later performed our set again for the Central States District in Lincoln, Nebraska and also on our Christmas shows at the Touhill Performing Arts Center in December 2009.

The Ambassadors of Harmony continued its quest toward musical excellence in 2010. In July 2010, the Ambassadors brought more new songs to the International Barbershop Music Convention in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. We introduced barbershop

⁸³ <http://www.harmonize.ws/HarmonetReporter/scores/2008/Fall/Chorus/SUM08DCH.HTM>

⁸⁴ <http://www.thetelegraph.com/entertainment/ambassadors-24726-harmony-alton.html>

⁸⁵ "Travel," *Long Beach Press-Telegram* (CA), 28 June 2009;

http://broadwayworld.com/article/Ambassadors_of_Harmony_Wins_2nd_Gold_Metal_In_2009_Intl_Barbershop_Chorus_Competition_20090706; <http://www.aoh.org/releases/070609.html>; "St. Charles Barbershop Chorus Wins Gold," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, 8 July 2009;

<http://schneiderrealestate.blogspot.com/>;

http://www.laduenews.com/articles/2009/07/24/society/ladue_ips/doc4a689541905e7130503987.txt;

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/robert-j-elisberg/calling-them-good-will-am_b_270368.html;

"Entertainment Briefs," *St. Charles Journal*, 15 July 2009; Sarah Bryan Miller, "St. Charles Barbershop Quartet Wins International Competition – Ambassadors of Harmony – 160 Voices Strong – Takes Gold Medal Over 28 Rivals," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, 26 July 2009; Kathie Bassett, "Golden Moment for Area Chorus," *Alton Telegraph* (IL), 10 August 2009

audiences to Pavel Chesnokov's "Salvation is Created" and to a new David Wright arrangement of "America" (from *West Side Story*), which was the last song we recorded for the new 2010 CD, "Oh, What a Day!" One of the highlights of the trip was the Ambassadors having a joint party with the Vocal Majority. What a blessing it was to sing with a chorus that had been (and continues to be) the face of barbershop chorus singing to so many throughout the world! We continued to perform to sellout crowds at our Christmas shows in 2010.

2011 began slowly for the Ambassadors of Harmony. The chorus started with only one hundred on the risers at the first rehearsal of the year. Eventually, the numbers began to rise again. Members of the Ambassadors traveled to Kansas City to perform at the 2011 Harmony Foundation show on 9 July. The Ambassadors of Harmony's next quest for musical excellence began on 21 July. The numbers on the risers continued to grow throughout the year. The chorus traveled to Kansas City for the Central States District 7-9 October. By this time, there were 133 men on the risers. The Ambassadors of Harmony won the Central States District Chorus Competition with a score of 1,703 or 94.6%, the highest score of any district champion in the society. The next closest score was held by the Great Northern Union of Hilltop, Minnesota (they finished seventeen points lower at 1,686 or 93.7%), which won the Land of Lakes District Competition.⁸⁶ Great Northern Union had come within five points of dethroning the previous year's returning champion (the Masters of Harmony) in 2011 in Kansas City.⁸⁷ A recording of "Seventy-Six Trombones" from our 2009 Anaheim performance was televised on the Gospel Music Channel's "America Sings!" on 3 August 2011.⁸⁸ Once again we had a Christmas show, this time with a first half featuring an ant theme (and filled to the brim with puns). The second half, for the first time, included a chamber ensemble accompanying us on "The Hallelujah Chorus" and "O Holy Night."

As 2012 began, we already had our new contest set. The new ballad, "No Other Love," was based on Chopin's etude opus 10 no. 3 in E Major. The up-tune was "Step in Time," based on the Broadway revival version of the song (rather than the version in the movie) from *Mary Poppins*. The time soon arrived for our spring retreat at the Holiday Inn in Alton, Illinois, 2-3 March. Greg Clancy flew in from Dallas to coach the chorus. The theme of the retreat that weekend was "Drive the Corvette, ditch the Camry," a phrase based on Jim Henry's comparison of the chorus to driving the two automobiles. Based on how we sing, we can give the director a Camry experience (safe, comfortable, and good) or the exhilarating experience of the Corvette. The Ambassadors of Harmony returned to the Lewis and Clark Community College in Godfrey, Illinois, the evening of 3 March as part of the Greater Alton Concert Association's concert series.⁸⁹ There was a vast amount of improvement on the contest set after the spring retreat. With Jim Henry out of town with his quartet (Crossroads), first Jonny Moroni and then David Wright stepped in to guide the chorus. Greg Clancy returned to St. Charles to coach the chorus on 18 June. We gave the first performance of our contest set at the spring shows at the Touhill on 23 June at "Voices in Harmony 2012."⁹⁰

⁸⁶ <http://www.harmonize.ws/HarmonetReporter/scores/2011/Fall/Chorus/SUM11DCH.HTM>

⁸⁷ <http://www.harmonize.ws/HarmonetReporter/scores/2011/Intl/INT11FCH.pdf>

⁸⁸ "Ambassadors of Harmony to perform tonight on televised singing contest," *St. Charles Journal*, 3 August 2011

⁸⁹ <http://www.thetelegraph.com/articles/ambassadors-66546-brings-gaca.html>

⁹⁰ "What's Up/Heads Up," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, 22 June 2012

The next week was a time of review and improvement. It was time for the trip to the International Barbershop Convention, held 1-8 July in Portland, Oregon. The chorus was housed in the Doubletree, where we also rehearsed. We continued to get better and better with each rehearsal on 4, 5, and 6 July. Greg Clancy was there, too, to cheer us on and to coach just a little more. Finally, the time came to be shuttled a couple of blocks from the Doubletree to the Rose Garden. We had our picture taken and then prepared to wait in another room. Then we walked up to the stage and prepared to perform. The crowd was already anticipating us and chants of "AOH" could already be heard as we walked up the stairs to the stage. The announcement came, the curtain opened and our set began. The ballad finished and we received a standing ovation. The up-tune followed with its typical energy. We finished the up-tune and there was another standing ovation, accompanied with lots of cheering. Many choruses had performed before us and there were a few after us. At the end of the night, the announcement of the medalist choruses was made. Once again, I sat on the edge of my seat and waited to see where we had finished. Fifth place ... Salem, Oregon; fourth place ... Stockholm, Sweden; third place ... Elizabethtown, Kentucky. No mention of our chorus. Then second place, "with 2,850 points, a 95 average, Hilltop, Minnesota, Great Northern Union." We stood and clapped for them. It had been a great contest. Finally, "First place and our 2012 International Chorus Champion, with a score of 2,903 points, a 96.8 average, St. Charles, Missouri, Ambassadors of Harmony."⁹¹ For the first time in the chorus' history, the Ambassadors of Harmony had won back-to-back gold medals. In 2009, the Ambassadors of Harmony became the first chorus in the history of the Barbershop Harmony Society to score over 2,900 points. The score in 2012 makes AOH the only chorus to have reached that milestone twice. There were several performances at the end of 2012, including five more Christmas performances at the Touhill. This time, the shows featured *A Christmas Carol* theme with some new songs drawn from musicals based on Dickens' novel. Also thrown in the mix were a hand bell choir, the St. Louis Children's Choirs (under the direction of Barbara Berner) and another great performance by Joneal Joplin, who has been featured on the St. Louis Muni stage and in several commercials. Joplin has appeared on several of the Christmas shows in recent years.

In 2013, the quest for musical excellence continues; the bar continues to be raised. New songs have been introduced and the goal for this year is to create a chorus culture of excellent technique and excellent singing. The basics continue to be reinforced while additional insights are given. The leadership continues to find new ways to refine the craft, to lead the chorus to fulfill its vision statement: "The Ambassadors of Harmony will be recognized as the highest quality and most entertaining choral organization in the St. Louis area and the Barbershop Harmony Society."⁹² This is a quest to continually refine the art of singing, to continually provide the emotionally moving experience that music can give. The goal is to use music to change lives and to create a chorus culture (things that we should do instinctively). As Dr. Jim Henry stated in 2007, barbershop is more than a hobby; it is a ministry, a ministry to the human soul.

Looking back on the up-tune the Ambassadors performed in 2009, Jim Henry

⁹¹ http://www.barbershop.org/images/INTL20120704_CF.OSS1.pdf;
http://www.stltoday.com/entertainment/music/kevin-johnson/ambassadors-of-harmony-take-another-first-place-prize/article_d9a384f2-cb5c-11e1-a064-0019bb30f31a.html

⁹² This vision statement is included in *Breaktime*, a weekly newsletter produced by chorus member Jim Parker for the Ambassadors of Harmony

stated, “That ‘76 Trombones’ performance didn’t drop out of the sky. That represents decades of blood, sweat and tears and doing everything possible to try to become excellent at barbershop.”⁹³ The road has been long and hard, but the journey has been rewarding. There have been so many gold-medal moments along the way. Greg Clancy summed up the attitude of the chorus in 2004, “Hard work is fun when improvement is evident.”⁹⁴ Celebrating fifty years in harmony, we are St. Charles’ Ambassadors of Harmony.

⁹³ Currier, 19

⁹⁴ “Ambassadors of Harmony” episode, “Living St. Louis, KETC Channel 9 (PBS), St. Louis, Missouri, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FgM3picQ0cU>