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Maine Gay Men's Chorus embraces change

By Michael J. Tobin
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"Where are all the gay people?"

The question was posed by an audience member at a recent concert of the Touring Ensemble of the Maine Gay Men's Chorus. The times they are a-changing for this group, which marks 20 years with a fresh approach to an original mission.

At nearly 20 years old, the Maine Gay Men's Chorus is turning a page. Some members say they see the choral group, in a changing world, keeping the spotlight on their music, not their sexual identity.

"The gay community has gone through such transition," said one member of the community performance arts organization. "Social technology (computers, texting) has become the new way to meet people. Our social priorities have changed and, despite our constant fight for total equality, we are more accepted. Unlike 20 years ago, there is nothing shocking about a gay chorus anymore so our attraction within the community now has to be based on the music we sing and how it's presented, not on being gay men who sing."

Twenty years ago, being gay was very different than what it is today, members agree. With the ever changing and challenging times politically, socially and economically, the chorus decided to take a sabbatical and re-evaluate its past and present so members could create a solid future.

With membership and financial support on a continuous decline, board members decided to go back to the group's musical roots, focusing on the artistry and education of the original mission statement; and to become fiscally responsible and maintain a strong financial foundation for their \$50,000 annual budget. And, just as importantly, board members sought to (re)introduce the community to the Maine Gay Men's Chorus, emphasizing that "we are singers who just happen to be gay," keeping the spotlight on their music, not their sexual identity.

Maine Gay Men's Chorus, a nonprofit organization, was founded in the summer of 1992 by a quartet of men under the leadership of University of Southern Maine professor, Bruce Fithian. Gay men ("...although straight men are welcome to join without fear of turning gay" a chorus member adds with a smile) had found a safe place to share their love of music, supportive social interaction and a voice to sing out to the community. Chorus membership has ranged from today's nine touring men to upwards of 60.

"The gay chorus was the first positive image the community-at-large had of gay people ... who could possibly be afraid of a bunch of men whose form of social activism is singing?" said Artistic

Director Art Kenne.

Today, Keene is in the process of creating a Queer Choir that will be made up of the gay-lesbian-bisexual-transgender youth community.

"(It's) an amazing opportunity for their powerful voices and messages of life, love and struggles of acceptance to be heard," he said.

Touring Ensemble Director Tom Wallace said the small ensemble will continue its tour and anticipates having new members join this group of more experienced singers. "This ensemble will perform the more challenging musical pieces, individually and collectively with glorious harmonies to be heard anywhere we are welcome," Wallace said.

"We are the traveling ambassadors representing the entire chorus," added Board President Andrew Johnson, "the community needs to hear and see us not as gay singers but as singers who happen to be gay — the music is the focus."

With a broad repertoire of music — from standards to secular, funny to poignant, Broadway to classical — there have also been pieces written just for the chorus including Bruce Spang and Tom Wallace's "The White Rose," an operatic tribute to Charlie Howard who was murdered in Bangor 26 years ago.

Kenne announced that this 2011-12 season will bring new and exciting opportunities.

"We're thrilled that Maine Gay Men's Chorus will be a part of the GALA Festival Chorus in Denver during July of 2012 " said Keene,. "The Gay and Lesbian Association of Choruses is the world's largest GLBT Arts Festival and helps choruses be strong both artistically and professionally. It's such an honor for Maine to be represented, singing with thousands of Gay people from all over the world."

Although there has been discussion in the past concerning the direction of the chorus and some say a lack of leadership of the organization, Johnson and the artistic team promised to offer collaborative leadership with a vision, bringing the original mission of "excellence in choral arts" back to the forefront. The goal also is to have a really fun time being social with each other within the chorus and outside of rehearsals. There was no shortage of stories from chorus members as to how much fun it is to be involved with a group of men that are "just like me."

But several MGMC members also shared their stories of how the chorus helped them personally as they discovered their place in the gay community. There are members who hadn't come "out" or did not feel comfortable or safe to be identified as "gay" so the chorus respected their personal choices by not disclosing their names in the playbill or didn't show their pictures. Many men in the chorus said they find support among each other as they struggle with the challenges of being a gay man — from "coming out" to relationship challenges to just being gay in the state of Maine. For many, these MGMC friends are the family they create for themselves. As one chorus member wrote, "I felt alone and scared when I came out but the chorus gave me a secure and positive place to be find my self confidence and self esteem."

"There is no question that the Maine Gay Men's Chorus changed my life," wrote one member, "it helped me accept myself not only as a gay man but helped me find my voice as a member of my community." Another member wrote, "The chorus made me realize that being gay is what I am, not who I am. What a gift to express myself through music in such a positive, welcoming atmosphere!"

Auditions for the chorus and touring ensemble will be held in September with details being posted on the MGMC website and in the press. There is a \$100 chorus fee that goes toward materials, concert costs and staffing, and each member needs to provide a tux. But Johnson was quick to add, "We know that the economy is tough and we will work with those men who can't afford the dues all at once or may not have access to a tux." Any member must be 18 years of age or older (the upcoming Queer Choir will be youth only) and each chorus rehearses one night a week. A

MGMC member can be in either or both of the choruses.

For more information, please contact the Maine Gay Men's Chorus at 370-8360 or visit the MGMC website at mainegaymenschorus.com. Leadership contacts are Artistic Director, Art Kenne director@mainegaymenschorus.com, Touring Ensemble Director, Tom Wallace, adirector@mainegaymenschorus.com and Board President, Andrew Johnson, president@mainegaymenschorus.com.



The Maine Gay Men's Chorus continues touring. (COURTESY PHOTO)

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