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Lifting voices and spirits

Children's Healthcare of Atlanta employee choir finds fellowship and healing in music

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By Laura Raines
Pulse editor

Five years ago, Cindy Burrell became the clinical educator for a five-member central staffing unit that works in the intensive care, emergency and medical/surgical units as needed at Children's Healthcare of Atlanta at Egleston.



Nick Arroyo, Special

Employee choir members (left to right) LuAnn Jinks, Danielle Sanders, Cindy Burrell, Sara Harmelin, Amber McKeen, Amanda Glanzer and Zephora Benson perform during a holiday celebration. The choir also sings at special events and memorial services for children who have passed away.



Nick Arroyo, Special

Sara Harmelin, a Children's Healthcare of Atlanta neonatal services nurse and an employee choir member, flashes a smile during a break.

"Now I'm responsible for the orientation, education and certification for 70 nurses, but I love it," said Burrell, RN, CPN.

She also loves music. When Burrell was a high school student, she sang in the all-state chorus and played the violin.

"I knew I either wanted to be a nurse or do something musical. Music didn't seem very practical, so I made the choice to be a nurse and keep music a hobby," she said.

Sometimes Burrell would sing her nursing reports on tape when handing off patients — much to the amusement of co-workers. Other times, she'd bring her violin to work and play. She frequently asked co-workers if they had musical backgrounds.

"About three years ago, I met Sarah Taylor, an assistant nurse manager on 4-West, and she suggested that we start a choir," Burrell said. "We got very excited, but knew that there would be a lot of hoops to jump through. A hospital choir was a new thing, and I hadn't heard of any others."

They used the health system's "strong for life" theme to sell the idea to hospital leaders. Children's supports helping its employees stay fit with exercise, nutrition and wellness programs.

"I told them that part of 'staying fit for life,' was being healthy in the emotional realm, and that music would speak to that," Burrell said. "I didn't know where or when we would sing, but I knew we'd practice and that it would be harmonious."

Burrell and Taylor, RN, BSN, called for potential members on Children's internal Web site and about 30 showed up for the first rehearsal. They chose the system's administration building as a central location for practice on Monday nights. In the beginning, Burrell lugged a portable keyboard from the chapel, but Children's has since provided a keyboard and polo shirts for choir members to wear when they perform.

"There was never going to be a good time for everyone on a hospital staff to practice, but those who really wanted to do it have found a way," said Burrell, who would like to see the group grow.

Fun and friendship

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One of those dedicated singers is Lyn Crawford, PT, a rehab clinical supervisor at Children's Healthcare of Atlanta at Scottish Rite.

"I saw the first notices and was there at the first meeting," Crawford said. "In physical therapy, you use music a lot with your patients. I've loved singing all my life and had sung in school and community choruses, but it had been a long time since I was part of an organized group."

What does she like best about the choir?

"The singing and the lovely people I've met. We're a big system and I've made some very good friends," Crawford said.

The choir's 16 women come from all areas of the hospital system. They sing sacred and secular music in three- and four-part harmony for soprano and alto parts. Russell Hallman, a Georgia State University music graduate student in conducting, directs part time.

"He'd never had a choir and we'd never been a choir, so we have learned from each other. He's passionate and knows how to pull energy from people," Burrell said.

When Hallman can't be there, she has taught herself to direct.

"We do some pretty difficult music and I'm a task master," Burrell said. "The group knows that I'll stop them and we'll go back if it sounds like we're singing between the cracks."

"When you get it right, music does something for you, and it's pretty indescribable. Sometimes at rehearsal, we'll realize, 'Hey, that was great,' and I'll look out and see nothing but smiling faces."

The choir's repertoire includes pieces as diverse as "Under the Sea" (from Disney's "Little Mermaid"), "I Want a Hippopotamus for Christmas" and the hymn "Precious Lord, Take My Hand." They perform several times a month and have sung for The Voice (Children's onsite radio station) and for patients and staff. The choir has also performed at special hospital events, veteran's and holiday celebrations, and at memorial services that units host for families of children who have passed away.

Diverse audiences

For Regina Lunde, singing the "Star Spangled Banner" at a Georgia Force football game at the Gwinnett Arena was a highlight.

"The choir had been in existence for about a year, but I couldn't join because my two sons [ages 11 and 12] sang in the Georgia Boy Choir, and their practice was on Monday nights," said Lunde, BS, RRT-NPS, supervisor of Children's infant Apnea Center. "When their schedule changed, I joined. I sang in choirs in high school and college."

Her sons attended the Force game and she knew they would critique the choir.

"When I asked them how we sounded, the oldest said 'It wasn't bad!' That's high praise from a 12-year-old who knows his way around choirs," she said with a laugh.

Lunde enjoys caroling for patients during the holidays. "It's fun to do something for work, and yet it not be work," she said.

Some members see the choir as another way of caring for children and co-workers. Not everyone can attend every performance, but Lunde, who sings soprano and alto, fills in as needed.

For memorial services, the choir chooses comforting and inspiring music. "The Prayer of the Children" is a favorite theme, because it speaks to Children's mission of caring.

"It's so hard to sing at those services, but we know that the nurses and the families appreciate it," Lunde said. "Now that more people have heard us, we're getting more requests."

Singing in the choir has become the highlight of Crawford's week.

"I look forward to it every week. It's nurturing for us and for others. Audiences appreciate what we do," she said.



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