

BOUND BY SONG

an article written by Amanda Weber for the Chorus America website, Spring 2011

Towards the end of my time as an undergraduate student at Luther College, I was in search of some serious vocational advice. One of my very wise professors suggested that I look into doing a year of volunteer work. Before I knew it, I was living in Washington, DC, working with the Steinbruck Center for Urban Studies – a ministry of Luther Place Memorial Church that facilitates experiential learning around urban homelessness and poverty. I was unsure of how my degrees in music and art led me to work with the homeless, but there I was! Over the course of my year in the Lutheran Volunteer Corps, I worked with over 500 mostly privileged individuals coming through the Steinbruck Center, seeking something beyond themselves.

As a part of my job, I had the wonderful opportunity to interact with the residents and staff of N Street Village – a continuum of care for homeless women begun by Luther Place in the 1970s. N Street serves over 900 homeless women a year – a mere third of the homeless female population in DC. One of the things N Street does well involves paying attention to a person's whole being. In addition to providing housing, food, and clothing, they offer classes through their Wellness Center – art, autobiography writing, yoga, cooking, etc. *Where's the music?* I wondered, shortly after my year began. There was a need and I was blessed with the gifts, so a couple days later, I was in the office with the director of the Wellness Center, making plans to teach a weekly music class.

For two and a half years now, I have been leading Bethany's Women of Praise, a group of almost 30 homeless or low-income women that receive N Street's services. I came into this opportunity with expectations as to what the women would want to sing and how good they would be. I was sure in all of my training that I would be prepared. I was wrong. I was wrong to assume the women would only want to sing gospel music; they have asked to learn about everything, including Gregorian chant. I was wrong to assume they would prefer learning music by ear; it has been empowering for them to learn that the notes on the page actually mean something. And I am wrong over and over again, each time I assume their reaction to the music of a composer.

They loved Bach. The music class loved Beethoven, and Chopin, and Debussy. They were fascinated by Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* and drawn into the story of *Peter and the Wolf*. When we spent a month exploring Jazz and the Blues, the class taught me. And for all of these reasons, I decided to challenge them with the music and philosophy of John Cage. I shared with the class how, throughout history, people have debated what qualifies as

“music.” When I asked them for their definition of music, the ladies responded that music is joy and soul. One woman even asked me to write healing on the board. At one point, I told the class I was going to play a piano piece and then proceeded to bang on the piano. “Is that music?” I asked. The response from the ladies blew me away: “That’s music! It sounds angry...but it represents how you must be feeling, and that’s okay! It’s okay to be angry! That’s definitely music!!”

Such strong women, coming from so many different places. Some are recovering addicts, some are mentally ill, some are illiterate or uneducated, some were abused. Some have college and post-college degrees, some were born into unfortunate situations, some have been lawyers, teachers, or government workers. Most are broken, but all are strong. And all of these women have learned so much about acceptance – accepting one another, accepting themselves. I have been blessed to watch individuals come together to form a community, bound by song. So many of the aspects I thought were unique about my choral experience growing up can and should be experienced by all, especially those who have the least access. In my efforts to teach Bethany’s Women of Praise, I have been taught. I have been welcomed. I have been served. Together, we have experienced a mutual hospitality that many are seeking, and I strongly believe music can facilitate.

We are certainly not the only homeless choir around. Unconventional choirs exist – prison choirs, nursing home choirs, choirs of people with mental or physical handicaps. But I look forward to the day when such groups are no longer classified as “unconventional.” On that day, we will truly understand the definition of music as healing, as one of my choir members said. We will see it as a power beyond ourselves – an inexplicable joy, an agitation for change, a tool for social justice, and a way to build community in a world that so desperately needs it.