

Sisters of a Chord

By Amy Manley

It's a bitterly cold Tuesday night in February, but gathered together in an East Syracuse gymnasium, 75 women are just warming up.

Four pitch pipes fill the room with the key of "A." With a short pause and a wind up, Director Kay Crawford signals, and the chorus launches forward to sing the intro of an old Dixieland classic. The sound is pure energy buzzing off the hardwood floor and through the air in four-part, a cappella harmony.

"Oh, play it hot or it don't seem right...I want some jazz...tonight... play all night!" Crawford waves off the first attempt. "That was pretty good, but I know you've done better. Baritones, remember to keep that 'ah' vowel tall and forward." The singers are off their heels and eager for another attempt to deliver better. The regional competition is just eight weeks away and the Spirit of Syracuse Chorus wants to achieve their highest scores this year. Made up of women from all over the Central New York region, the SOS Chorus has been performing the uniquely American art form of Barbershop for almost 54 years. Not to take anything away from the men, but to this group of extraordinary women, Barbershop is serious business. Unlike traditional choral type singing, Barbershop is sung unaccompanied with four voice parts; lead, baritone, bass and tenor. When it's done right, its close-harmony is a thrilling experience for both the singer and the audience.

Not only do some the members of this chorus travel from far and wide to attend weekly rehearsals, the women come from a wide range of backgrounds. On any given Tuesday you will find doctors, teachers, retirees and even a federal agent mingling on the risers. Veterinarian Holly Reid has been singing bass in the chorus for 14 years. For her it's better than therapy. "When I am singing, I am transported away from day-to-day stresses. When we are ringing chords, it touches me to my core and gives me goosebumps!" Reid says. "I Live for Tuesday nights!"

And for some members, it's a family affair, passing the love of barbershop down from generation to generation. Sisters Julie Martin and Jennie Weinberger are two of the newest members of the chorus after their mother encouraged them to try it. "We grew up listening to mom and grandma's chorus stories. Now grandma has to listen to all our Sweet Adeline stories," Martin says. "It's wonderful being able to share this experience."

Over the past 10 years the chorus has risen to the top levels in the Sweet Adeline organization, qualifying to compete internationally four times. In 2008, the Chorus placed 17th at the International competition in Calgary, Canada. Being a top 20 chorus, out of 600 worldwide, was an enormous honor for the Spirit of Syracuse; and something they hope to repeat in the near future.

Music teacher, Sky Harris also comes from a Barbershop family. Although she has a master's degree in music, singing with the Spirit of Syracuse has had a unique impact on her. "On the risers, I can be a storyteller. I can be powerful. Everyone should experience this!"

If you love to sing, the chorus has a place for you. All women are invited to attend any of the chorus' weekly rehearsals, which are held from 7 to 10 p.m. on Tuesdays at St. Matthew's Academy, 214 Kinne St., East Syracuse. For more information about the chorus visit www.spiritofsyracuse.com.

