

## Singing and Memory Care Choirs as an Intervention to Alzheimer's

By Garry Froese

### Why work with aging voices?

Seniors are now living longer and contributing to our families, communities and society as a whole well into their later years! This trend prompts a series of questions which our government, health services and organizations such as NATS are beginning to ask. How large and significant a segment of our population is and will be comprised of seniors? How important is it for the rest of society to pay attention to the care of this segment of our global population? How costly will such initiatives be? What are some of the strategies that can be instituted on a sustainable cost-effective basis?

In viewing the big picture, the World Health Organization (WHO) is predicting that "...1 in 6 people in the world will be aged 60 years or over..."<sup>1</sup> by 2030! "By 2050, the world's population of people aged 60 years and older will double (2.1 billion). The number of persons aged 80 years or older is expected to triple between 2020 and 2050 to reach 426 million."<sup>2</sup>

It is not uncommon for seniors to follow up on a passion or further education that they weren't able to explore as they were building their careers or a business, raising a family or supporting a spouse or partner in their endeavors. Learning to sing is often one of these passions. Many of our seniors are curious life-long learners that are interested and capable of honing their vocal and musical skills. Interestingly, not only are they motivated to learn, but it is in the interest of society to support the development of these positive mental habits, as well as reinforcing the physical conditioning which will allow them to age gradually, while maintaining their health and personal independence for a longer period of time. These pursuits, however, are dependent upon several key factors: namely *relative mental and physical health*.

### Dementia and its impact

Dementia in its various forms is recognized as a serious threat to seniors' health. Dementia being "...a general term for a decline in mental ability severe enough to interfere with daily life, while Alzheimer's is a specific disease. Alzheimer's is the



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most common cause of dementia... Dementia describes a group of *symptoms* associated with a decline in memory, reasoning or other thinking skills. ... Alzheimer's disease is the most common cause of dementia, accounting for 60–80% of dementia cases."<sup>3</sup>

What do we know about dementia? "While these increases are predominantly attributed to global population growth and population aging, the authors also explore four known [risk factors for dementia](#): smoking, obesity, high blood sugar and low education, and highlight how they may impact these future

estimates."<sup>4</sup> William Brangham conducted an interview on PBS News on June 20, 2023 with Dr. Richard J. Hodes, Director of the National Institute on Aging at the National Institutes of Health (NIH) on factors concerning Alzheimer's disease. Dr. Hodes indicated that "... in addition to looking for cures, treatments, *the ability to intervene, to decrease risk, to prevent is enormously important*. ...And the risk factors for which there was the best evidence that intervention could help were three identified at that point, one, *control of blood pressure*, the other, *maintaining cognitive activity*, and third, *physical activity*."<sup>5</sup>

**Singing is an activity which can have a positive impact on all three areas! Since singing is an activity that can create a positive mind set and release endorphins which in turn can help to relieve pain, reduce stress and improve the participant's sense of well-being, this can have a favorable impact on blood pressure levels. The cognitive activity in singing has been proven to bring about brain activity across neural pathways like few other mental pursuits. Lastly, singing, when taught within a framework of emphasizing methodical approaches to the development of the breathing system can be a most helpful physical conditioning activity.**

Those of us that work with seniors know the value of keeping them connected to family and community. Therefore, searching for cost-effective means of preventing or at least, postponing and intervening in the advancement and impact of Alzheimer's in the burgeoning senior population globally is important to society!



## A viable intervention

Enter *Voices in Motion*<sup>6</sup> of Victoria, British Columbia, Canada, an Alzheimer's choir with a twist! *Voices in Motion* (ViM) was the brainchild of Dr. Debra Sheets, now Professor Emerita, School of Nursing, University of Victoria, whose father had lived with Alzheimer's for 17 years prior to his death. She approached Dr. Mary Kennedy, Associate Professor Emerita, Music Education, University of Victoria, for some assistance in forming a choir for persons with Alzheimer's and their caregivers for research purposes. Drs. Sheets and Kennedy enlisted the support and participation of Dr. Stuart McDonald, Psychology and Dr. André Smith, Sociology and gained approval for this program as a University of Victoria sponsored research project.

Dr. Kennedy found a suitable conductor, Erica Phare-Bergh and Julian Greenwood, to serve as a collaborative pianist. She also recommended a partnership with St. Andrew's Regional High School, an independent co-educational Catholic High School of approximately 475 Grade 8–12 students, serving young persons from Greater Victoria, in co-operation with their choral teacher, Philip O'Reilly. The school's early dismissal schedule for Wednesday afternoons provided an ideal time for the involvement of the high school students with the proposed Alzheimer's choir, creating a community-based intergenerational choir! Interested students are identified following a fall school assembly presentation and receiving an orientation session prior to joining the choir. The students are expected to make a regular commitment to the program. In recognition for this community service, the students are given a certificate indicating the number of hours that each has committed to this project, in partial fulfilment for some of their provincial graduation requirements. The purpose of the

program is to form an intergenerational choir to assist in reducing isolation for those on the dementia journey and their caregivers, bringing joy and creativity back into the lives of the participants.

The rehearsal process begins with students sitting beside singers who are on their Alzheimer's journey (rather than their caregivers), thereby giving their caregivers a break during the rehearsal. The students learn not to be afraid of the participants with this disabling disease. Furthermore, they learn how to communicate with the singers on their Alzheimer's journey and even accept the participants as their surrogate grandparents, especially for those students who have no grandparents living in the vicinity, says Dr. Mary Kennedy.

Dr. Kennedy reinforced a unique characteristic of this choir being that the conductor makes certain that the choir experience is not merely a "sing-along," but rather demands the very best musical and vocal sounds that they can generate. The presence of the high school choristers gives some stability to the ensemble sound. The goal of holding a public concert is a strong motivator for the whole group.

## Benefits of an intergenerational Alzheimer's choir program

Interestingly, Dr. Kennedy indicated that the intergenerational choir helps to destigmatize dementia, observing that at the concert performances, it has become increasingly difficult to tell who is dealing with Alzheimer's and who isn't!

Dr. Sheets writes that "... (the) community-based programs (*ViM* and *Memory Café Victoria*) offer professionally led activities focused on learning, joyful engagement, and social connections. These programs are shown to decrease loneliness, depression,

caregiver distress, and the rate of cognitive decline. Findings suggest that arts-based dementia programs are a cost-effective approach to reduce social isolation and stigma as well as create a community of belonging and acceptance. Arts-based programs shift attention away from declines associated with memory loss. They allow the PwD (persons with dementia) to live more fully now, giving hope in the absence of a medical cure.”<sup>7</sup>

“Many of our seniors are curious life-long learners that are interested and capable of honing their vocal and musical skills.”

In an interdisciplinary study on ViM conducted by André P. Smith et al entitled *Choral singing and dementia: Exploring musicality as embodied and relational accomplishment* list among other benefits such as “Persons with dementia retain the ability to sing in a choir despite cognitive loss ... (and) ... Choir singing encourages social relationships beneficial to persons with dementia.”<sup>8</sup>

Stephen Clift et al in their chapter entitled *Health and Well-Being Benefits of Singing for Older People* describes the benefits of singing for Alzheimer’s singers as follows: “Camic et al. (2013) also found that people with dementia and their carers had high engagement levels in the singing groups they established, and quality of life remained relatively stable. Qualitative data showed clearly that singing promoted well-being for all participants. For the person with dementia, participation in a singing group challenged their own beliefs about not being able to sing and no longer fitting into ‘normal’ activities. They were able to take risks in learning new songs, rhythms and movements in a socially inclusive environment. It challenged the commonly held belief that people with dementia are not capable of taking on new activities.”<sup>9</sup>

Carol Beynon and Jennifer Lang in their chapter entitled *Singing My Way Back to You: Mapping the Learning Journey of Persons with Dementia through Singing in an Intergenerational Choir* describe the benefits in the following manner:

“Rehearsals involved the teaching of specific vocal techniques, and observations and interviews revealed improved technique for all singers with dementia, including:

- increased breathing support when singing
- better posture
- improved focus on the conductor and/or partner
- improved focus on print or music sheets
- expanded singing range

- recall of songs from childhood and ability to verbalize many of the complex words
- improved and clearer speaking after singing which remained for varying times afterward, depending on the individual
- learning and retention of new songs (new melody, new rhythms, new texts, and in some cases new harmony lines) and
- improved (albeit temporary) cognitive processing...”<sup>10</sup>

Beynon and Lang go on to detail the aspects of spiritual and aesthetic wellness in the experience as follows:

“Singers with dementia further shared that they:

- felt involved
- experienced reduced isolation and loneliness (also true for caregivers)
- enjoyed singing
- felt less confusion and depression
- demonstrated a positive mood and were cooperative, when often they had been described as being angry, confused, defiant, even violent in some cases; and
- expressed gratitude over and over again for being involved in the program.”<sup>11</sup>

When working with people on their dementia journey, one sees that individuals are frequently aware that their brain is no longer functioning as it used to. The individual, at times, may be able to recall memories of the distant past. The point in making music together is not however to try to live in this past, but to help the individual to celebrate the “here and now” that they are able to enjoy in the company of others! This author can think of no better way to synthesize the impact and significance of participating in an Alzheimer’s choir than the following excerpt from a poem written in a collaborative setting of dementia patients working with music students:

I put my arms around my life  
 Slowly embracing it  
 I can visit the past  
 but I can’t live inside it  
 that’s OK —  
 I can be here right now.<sup>12</sup>

### In conclusion

Is it not in the best interests of our profession and society to educate our vocal students about not only the artistic and health-based potential and benefits of working in such musical endeavors? It is this author’s hypothesis that our music training programs need to include instruction and current research into how to effectively work with aging voices, including strategies



that will enable aging singers to continue making music well into their old age. Would it not be helpful to educate our vocal and music education students to identify characteristics and symptoms of a variety of vocal anomalies that are sometimes simply attributed to the aging process, so that they can be knowledgeably referred on to well qualified otolaryngologists, speech and language pathologists and vocal or acting voice practitioners so that aging singers can keep communicating effectively with family and community members?

Given the statistics, the changing demographics and the research substantiating the practicality and success of such efforts, this author hopes more intergenerational Alzheimer's choirs will prove to be part of a menu of recognized strategies that can be constructively used to reach out to this demographic in our communities.

Dr. Garry Froese extends his heartfelt thanks to Dr. Mary Kennedy for an informative interview.

For more information on this specific program, visit [voicesinmotionchoirs.org](https://voicesinmotionchoirs.org).

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