

Homeless, Not Voiceless – Largest Street Choir Seeks to Remind a Privileged World

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By Abby Zimet, Further columnist

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For a break from the madness, a small story out of Dallas, where the country's largest street choir seeks to remind a privileged world and each other, "We may be homeless but we never gave up." Created in 2014 by Jonathan Palant, a music professor at the University of Texas, the Dallas Street Choir offers an often vital musical, emotional and social outlet for those enduring hard times. Most of its members are homeless – many stay in shelters, the rest on the street – in a city and state that has seen both a booming economy and soaring homelessness. In the face of the hardships of the street, Palant is "using what it is I do to bring people together...The arts (are) a powerful tool to tear down walls and barriers and perceptions and stigmas and stereotypes, to show we're really more the same than not." Nearly 2,000 people have come to at least one of his Wednesday morning rehearsals at The Stewpot, a Dallas resource center for the homeless; carting sleeping bags and bag packs, they line up for a fist-bump and an hour of singing, followed by a snack and a bus voucher. Some disappear again; others become regulars in the Choir's 15 or so concerts a year. Through music, Palant says, they create a place to come together: "You may not have four walls, but our singers will tell you, four walls, a home doesn't make." Their tagline: "Homeless, not voiceless."

Playing piano and providing lyrics, Palant often leads his "scrappy" choir members, many of them African-American, in songs that resonate for them – "You Will Be Found," "Tomorrow," "Lean On Me," "Put a Little Love in Your Heart," Paul Simon's sorrows "Gone at Last." Their urgent message, says one singer: "Please do not give up on us, as we have not given up on ourselves." Nor, within their ad hoc community, do they give up on each other: Another says he prays for those on the streets – "It hurt me deep down inside" – even as the choir "makes me stronger, makes my voice stronger." The choir has performed at The Stewpot, at schools and venues across Texas, at Washington's National Cathedral, and with the Dallas Opera. For many, their most thrilling performance was at Carnegie Hall, an event filmed by The Today Show. Moving footage captures the singers entering the grand space, where they stand staring, open-mouthed, sometimes tearful. "I've been poor all my life," says one woman, "but today I feel rich." Before the show, Palant is asked if he thinks his singers are "Carnegie Hall good." He pointedly argues the question should be, "Are they Carnegie Hall worthy?" and stirringly answers, yes. Agreed, says one glad singer: "Music is a therapy."

“God help the outcasts, hungry from birth. Show them the mercy they don’t find on earth. God help my people, we look to you still. God help the outcasts or nobody will....” – one Choir performance of a song from Disney’s *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*.

