



This Is Why: The Heart and Soul of GMCLA

By: Mary Jo De Silva

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An organization of nearly 300 members that started in 1979, the Gay Men's Chorus of Los Angeles, or GMCLA, has performed on some of the most renowned stages in the world, commissioned over 300 new works, appeared on various television shows, and brought music education and a message of anti-bullying to countless underserved schools and juvenile detention centers.

GMCLA sings for a world free from homophobia and all other forms of discrimination, and all of these aspects of what it does—brotherhood and community, concerts and performances, arts education programs—have at least one thing in common: they carry the message that all people should be able to live their lives as their authentic selves, free from discrimination and persecution.

Members collectively spend thousands of hours volunteering each year. At minimum, a chorus member dedicates more than 100 hours per year rehearsing, performing, helping with GMCLA's anti-bullying and music education programs for youth, and pitching in to make GMCLA's season concerts a reality. The resulting music has been heard by millions on national television and by hundreds of thousands in live performances. In Los Angeles alone, GMCLA has performed at the Hollywood Bowl, the Forum, and Walt Disney Concert Hall. Outside of California, the Chorus has appeared at Carnegie Hall in New York, Tchaikovsky Concert Hall in Moscow, and dozens of venues in between.



(Performing at Tchaikovsky Hall, Moscow with Alla Pugacheva – October 9, 1999 – Photo by Fred Camerer)

Through youth music education programs, the Chorus has also reached more than 55,000 at-risk teenagers in underserved areas of Los Angeles County with a message of acceptance, understanding, and inclusion. To help



carry out its mission of education, bringing its message to as many people as possible, GMCLA launched the Alive Music Project (AMP) in 2007, introducing its outstanding music to high school and middle school students.

In 2017, GMCLA also began partnering with Arts for Incarcerated Youth Network to offer choral music education programs for youth in juvenile detention centers. Additionally, GMCLA now provides 12-week music education programs in Los Angeles public schools where no other choral music education is available (currently in collaboration with the Partnership for Los Angeles Schools). With these programs, GMCLA brings music education, and with it, a safe space for communication, an artistic outlet, and an open forum for free expression to young people who would otherwise have none.



(GMCLA performing at the first ever Laker's Equality Night – October 4, 2018)

One member of the Chorus who has seen firsthand GMCLA's growth and recalls various times when GMCLA has been by his side with love, is 24-year member and retired pastor and therapist Steve Pieters. Steve first reflected upon the height of the AIDS crisis, during which members were dying almost weekly and GMCLA became a light of hope and support system. "Two or three times a month we would have memorial services at the end of rehearsal for the fellow died that week. John Bailey was our conductor back then and he would take the last twenty to thirty minutes of rehearsal and have us just share memories and stories about the person who just died. And then at the very end, we would sing *A Gaelic Blessing*, which is just the gorgeous piece that we had a beautiful arrangement of and, of course, the Chorus was always awash in tears."



(L/R – Steve Smith, Doug Hutchinson, Steve Pieters)

Steve reflected further, “There was a steady rhythm, a steady march of death in the Chorus and we had 150 members when I joined. We lost 150 members over those years... That was one of the biggest challenges that I faced in the Chorus: to see all these men dying of a disease that I survived, that I still have. It may not be a happy story, but it’s a part of our history. It’s really important.”

While HIV/AIDS treatments improved and the steady march lessened within the Chorus, Steve continued fighting his own battles, including AIDS and bouts of what was deemed terminal cancer, during which his GMCLA family always remained by his side, as in 2012. “They visited me in the hospital and then at home as I was recovering. They were so encouraging to me, and it took me several years to recover from that. Everything from bringing me groceries to just keeping me company watching TV...I knew I had all these wonderful men at my back.”



(The newly formed GMCLA at the first March on Washington – 1979)

In 1979, the original 99 members of GMCLA gathered at West Hollywood’s Plummer Park, marking the birth of this Chorus family. A few months later, founding director Harold Kjellberg led GMCLA through its first major event, the March on Washington, D.C. and the first LGBT concert at the Washington Memorial. This helped lay the foundation for GMCLA’s mission, still seen today in every Pride march and concert it does, most recently with *Dos Coros, Una Voz*, in which the Chorus sang with Coro Gay Ciudad de México, battling hurdles such as homeland security to continue to put on a concert that promoted unity and love during divisive times.

GMCLA has become synonymous with artistry and advocacy. GMCLA singer, Chair of GMCLA Board of Directors, and Mayor of West Hollywood John Duran explained: “Art advocates for a point of view. Art has an opinion. Art can accomplish things more subtly, more delicately, and can appeal to people’s hearts rather than their heads. GMCLA has been very involved in moving the cause of equality for LGBT people forward over the decades. It continues to do so now in schools, in juvenile detention facilities, in community concerts around the county.”

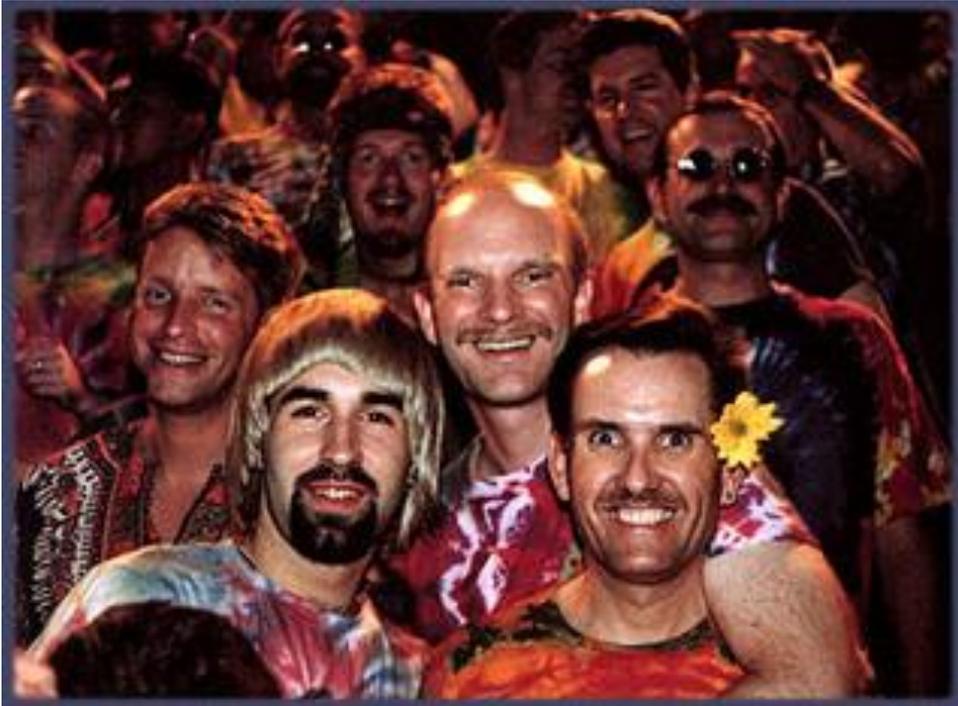


(John Duran - The Dos Coros Una Voz concert – October 13, 2018 – Photo by Jamie Pham)

John Duran wears many hats. As for his Mayor hat, John said that going into politics was not so much a choice, as a responsibility he felt as a young attorney when the AIDS epidemic hit California and many of his friends became sick. “We did not have laws to handle an epidemic, so I had to figure out how to create new law...to change the law to make life better for, first, people with HIV, and, second, LGBT people, led me into legal issues for the community and that into politics and that into elections.”

In looking back on his time with both the Chorus and the Board, admittedly first joining to travel to Russia (GMCLA was going on a second international tour at the time) and not planning on staying past one concert, then going on to spearhead the Board of Directors, John said, “It’s been great to be part of a repositioning of an organization from merely being artistic to being artistic and advocacy, equal pronouncement on both.”

Chorus member and master of I.T. and Media Development in the GMCLA offices James, AKA Jim, Geiger agrees on the importance of both artistry and advocacy. Jim loves working and singing with the GMCLA family, and on moving forward as an organization, he said, “I would like to see GMCLA be the voice of the Los Angeles gay community...to engage such a diverse community (and) to help make all of the community come together to see that we’re all just people. We all want love and acceptance.”



(Feelin' Groovy - L/R – Jayson Rivest, James Geiger, Glenn Miller – 6/29/96)

Those who engage with the Chorus in any way will find just that: love and acceptance. Having sang on stages like Carnegie Hall and travelled to others all around the world with GMCLA on every international tour, Jim remembers moments with his family on stage in which he felt most at peace with the universe. “It’s rare moment when you feel you’re simply a vessel of communication, and the audience responds and gives that energy back, and it’s this incredible loop of wonderment. The most intensely spiritual moments of my life have happened through the Chorus.”

In addition to producing several Broadway-quality concerts each year and performing at dozens of community events, GMCLA brings music and acceptance to students in underserved areas through youth education programs. Jerwin Monje is one member who appreciates the advocacy work he gets to do with GMCLA. Outside of the Chorus, Jerwin is a music therapist who currently works with geriatric patients on hospice, and their family members. Along with performing on stage, Jerwin participates in GMCLA’s youth music education programs. Speaking about the Alive Music Project (AMP), in which chorus members sing and share stories about coming out with students during an anti-bullying assembly, Jerwin said, “It was so powerful being able to say that to kids and have kids come up to me after saying that my story resonated with them or that they could relate to it, and that they were proud I had the courage to be able to tell my parents that I was gay.”



(Jerwin Monje)

Jerwin also teaches for GMCLA’s program in partnership with the Arts for Incarcerated Youth Network (AIYN). The program—the first of its kind in Los Angeles—brings music education to students in juvenile detention centers. “It was a growing experience not only for myself, but for the guys there. No other chorus is doing this. We’re really spearheading and piloting this movement to bring acceptance, to bring music to these kids who really need it, who need an outlet. It’s just an amazing feeling to see the final product, being able to see those kids share what we’ve worked on for twelve weeks.”

Students from GMCLA’s Arts for Incarcerated Youth program have shown tremendous growth in many areas. Over the course of the program at Dorothy Kirby Center, one of the young men opened up about having same-sex parents who are going through a divorce, which he hadn’t disclosed to staff at the Center. Another demonstrated significant talent in playing the piano and accepted responsibility to learn new skills as an accompanist, in addition to singing. Among the young women participating, one in particular—who had refused to participate in any of the more than two dozen voluntary activities offered at the center—took part in the GMCLA program, to the surprise and delight of the Center staff.

Overall, the students who participate in this program express more positive attitudes toward music, mental health, their peers, and surrounding adults, as well as seem more open and able to communicate with each other and adults by the end of the program. One student said, “I felt like I belonged somewhere for once in my life.” Other student quotes include, “We learned to collaborate with each other,” and, “It inspired me to not be afraid of being heard.”

From to youth programs, to concerts, to marches, to volunteering at Triangle Square with LGBT elders, GMCLA brings people of all ages and all backgrounds together. Zach Gassoumis came to the Chorus after meeting other guys auditioning at a coming out workshop in 2010. “It was a good way of both getting to fulfill the singing that I’d been missing for a while and that I’d wanted to get back in my life, as well as joining the gay community.” On coming out and joining GMCLA simultaneously, Zach continued, “Coming out in GMCLA is a hell’va way to come out.”



Zach studies and teaches the aging process as a Professor of Gerontology at the University of Southern California, and he also helped lead GMCLA's Membership Committee for a number of years. He loves seeing the support system GMCLA provides to not only to young people, but also to aging members who, as he pointed out, may have lost their biological families in the coming out process. "It's really remarkable and encouraging that for our membership, they have this GMCLA family that is taking place of those they may have lost. They have a family and a network that they can turn to, to provide support and interaction. I've done hands-on caregiving with some of our members."



(Zach Gassoumis – second from left - "He Had It Coming" 4/1/2017)

Whether you come to GMCLA to sing and find your tribe or to listen and find solace in the beauty of tear-evoking song, you will certainly learn a little more about yourself in the process. While every GMCLA member is vastly different from career to personality, and, as staff member Brienne Cohen once pointed out, you could survive on an island with only GMCLA members, one common thread among them that brings them together is that search for family. Anthony Archibold, preschool teacher originally from New York, joined GMCLA to find his new family and got so much more.

On joining GMCLA (after a very last-minute decision to audition, singing the only song he knew by note, "Chestnuts Roasting on an Open Fire"), Anthony said that, not only did he find a family, he found himself. "They built me up. They made me more confident. They allowed me to wake up and say, 'You're gay, you're black, and it's okay.' It gave me a family...it changed my life tremendously. I've never had so many gay friends who cared. It changed my life because it showed me that who I am is ok. Who I am is beautiful. What I am is love."



One favorite moment Anthony has had with the Chorus, he described in detail. “It was the holiday concert. The lights were dim and they were blue...and the song was ‘We are a family.’ We’re all on the stage and we’re swaying and tears welled up in my eyes because I thought about how I’m so far from home, literally on the other side of the country. ‘We are family, like a branching tree reaching out toward the sky.’ We’re holding each other, we’re swaying, and we’re singing, and I think that’s my favorite memory because at that point, I felt like I’m exactly where I need to be.”



(Women’s March – Anthony Archibald, second from left)