

# **A Creative Music Ministry Serving the Homeless and Underserved: Harmony, Hope & Healing**

Marge Nykaza

## **Beginning the Ministry**

In a *Social Ethics* class, I as a singer and music minister was inspired to have a greater vision for the arts as a social justice issue. I enrolled in the class *Women in Ministry in the City* in the summer of 2000. The class offered the opportunity to work at St. Martin de Porres House of Hope, a recovery shelter for 75 women and their children on the south side of Chicago. While meeting with the director of the shelter in preparation for the course, I told her of my life-long love of music. We decided that I would initiate a music program.

The program included the formation of a women's choir, a music class for the children and parent/child music class. The activities proved to be a very enjoyable and positive experience for many of the participants, albeit with some difficult moments. During that time I witnessed daily the healing power of music in the lives of women and children as they struggled to recover from the adverse effects of poverty, homelessness and addiction.

When the summer course ended, I knew in my heart that this was my work, so I continued at St. Martins as a volunteer. The directors felt that the music classes were helping bolster the resident's self-esteem. The classes strengthened their bonds with the shelter as they faithfully showed up. There was a more positive attitude around the house. Because of these changes, the director decided to make music a part of the recovery program and a mandatory activity for the women.

I began to network and seek funding to develop music programs at other shelters and underserved community outreach programs. The connections started to happen. With the Sisters of Mercy and the Agatha O'Brien Fund, in 2001 I started a program at *The Institute of Women Today*. This encompassed Maria Shelter, a transitional shelter for women and children, the Vincennes Senior Center, a center for seniors in Englewood Community and Casa Notre Dame, a long-term housing program for women and their children. Then in 2002, with the help of a Norbertine Grant, I initiated a program at *Marah's Transitional House of Deborah's Place*, a women's shelter. In December 2002 I began to work with women and their children at *The Mantle of Port Ministries*, a community outreach program for families from Mexico and Guatemala.

## **Organizing the Ministry**

Recognizing the potential of this creative healing program, I knew that a formal organization was needed to sustain and carry it into the future. I called upon the help of seven friends and board members, an accountant and lawyer. “**Harmony, Hope & Healing**” became an official non-profit organization in February 2003.

Formalizing HHH was an exciting, life-changing experience for me. I was no longer doing the work alone, but with others. We were collectively serving and sharing our mission as a creative music program offering dignity and spiritual healing to the homeless and underserved in the Chicago are. As our fledgling organization began to grow, we made a connection with an Episcopal outreach, Cathedral Shelter. We initiated a program for their men’s half-way house, Higgins House, in 2005.

## **HHH Today**

The HHH program has evolved into the following five activities:

1. **Adult Music Session which include Choir Rehearsals**

St. Martin de Porres House of Hope  
Vincennes Senior Center of IWT  
Maria Shelter of IWT  
Higgins House of Cathedral Shelter

2. **Children’s Music Classes**

St. Martin de Porres House of Hope

3. **Parent/Child Music Classes**

St. Martin de Porres House of Hope  
The Mantle of Port Ministries

4. **Musical English Lessons-(ESL)**

The Mantle of Port Ministries

5. **Senior Group Piano Lessons**

Vincennes Senior Center of IWT

Our curriculum has developed to include musical, educational, therapeutic, spiritual, and performance components. It is offered in four ten-week sessions per year. All activities are conducted in a circle and meet for an hour each week. Sessions include breathing and vocal exercises, singing, dancing, and playing instruments. Discussions on topics which support the HHH mission and goals are also included.

Our goals are to:

- integrate music into daily life experiences;
- provide opportunities to experience healing and spirituality through music;
- build self-esteem and confidence;

- enable the learning process through music;
- offer a safe place to uncover and/or rediscover participant's own authentic voice; and
- provide experiences that invite participants to sense beauty and harmony within themselves and in the world around them.

Our ultimate goal is to use music as a healing tool and a vehicle to enhance life skills while improving overall quality of life.

The HHH Choir is a very popular and high profile activity. The choir generally sings in a Gospel/Inspirational style. It performs two or three times per month for various church services and events. We are proud to state that we have released 3 CDs and hope to record a Christmas CD this summer. Internships are also available to current or former participants. Assisting with the HHH programs enable interns to develop life and employment skills.

In addition to our weekly programs and choir performance, HHH has built local and international relationships. We participate with high school students and young adults in Peacebuilders Project and Catholics on Call at Catholic Theological Union. We have a connection with Africa. Thanks to a HHH participant at Deborah's Place and our first CD project in 2003, we met Grace Mwele and established a relationship with her choir at Our Lady of the Visitation Church in Nairobi, Kenya. I had the opportunity to visit her in 2005. In 2007, Grace and I were invited by Global Alliance for Africa (GAA) to team-teach at an Art Camp for orphans in Arusha, Tanzania. During the summer of 2008, Grace spent time with us, visiting our program sites in Chicago and attending the National Pastoral Musician (NPM) Convention in Ohio. At the closing event of the 2009 NPM convention in Chicago, the HHH Choir and the Our Lady of the Visitation Choir sang together via video. What a blessing to make music together with local and global friends!

While the programming continues to serve across the city and abroad, the ministry requires roots and a central location where all the "behind the scene" organizing can take place. In previous years we have been grateful for temporary offices with the Irish Christian Brothers and at Most Holy Redeemer, my home parish. Recently we had the blessed opportunity to move our office to the Social Concerns Building associated with the Old St. Pat's Community in Downtown Chicago. From this vibrant space and place, we can continue to nurture our roots and grow as a ministry!

### **Introducing Those Who Serve**

At the present time we have six paid staff and Sue Yant, a volunteer HHH Board Member who assists in the office. I am the only full-time employee. The five part-time employees include

- Marcia Berry, a local choir director and HHH friend, who directs the Vincennes Senior Choir,

- Amanda Longa, a former participant, who co-facilitates the children's music sessions and parent/child class music classes at St. Martin de Porres House of Hope as well as an adult group music session at Maria Shelter,
- Cherisse Ellis, Edith Watson and Wanda Patterson, former participants, who are soloists and group leaders for the HHH Choir.

In addition to our employees, our staff includes a Hispanic music coordinator, an accompanist and professional consultants which consist of a development/grant writer, an accountant, an auditor, a lawyer, a web master, and a computer support person.

We are able to run a successful and far-reaching program because we are blessed with the ever-growing support of a community which believes in and is committed to our mission. We are grateful that so many people are willing to share their time, talent and treasure with us. We find that once people get involved, they are eager to stay connected. The involvement is manifested in a variety of ways and include singing with our choir, hosting a choir performance, donating musical instruments, helping with publicity and newsletters, taking photos and videos, babysitting children during performances, being a guest artist... and much more.

### **Financing the Ministry**

HHH functions financially as a typical non-profit organization, depending upon in-kind services, individual contributions, corporate and foundation support, grants, and contractual services revenue. Various fundraising efforts include bi-annual newsletters, an annual appeal letter, performances and special events. It must be noted that HHH was created and continues to be supported by a community of generous friends, foundations along with the various agencies we serve. They have grown to trust and believe in our mission and we are forever grateful for their support. Without them HHH could not exist!

### **Reflecting on the Ministry**

The journey of establishing and operating a non-profit organization can be difficult at times. There are concerns about funding sources, quantifying the work for grants, stabilizing programs at various sites, and workload. There have been some very difficult moments of doubting and questioning for us. Despite those times, this work is awesome! To the best of our ability we provide a creative healing and recovery tool from the negative effects of poverty, homelessness, domestic violence, drug and alcohol abuse and aging. HHH also bridges language gaps while enabling participants to use their authentic voice.

When I first started HHH, I dreamt of having sites all over the city and the country. In reality, I believe that right now, we best serve by growing internally in this city, laying a solid foundation, and being a model for others.

Here are some lessons we have learned through HHH.

- Recognize that the arts can be used to confront with social justice issues.
- Work and pray to serve in a spirit of love and acceptance.
- Recognize your true strengths. The participants do not ask about credentials and degrees. They say, “This music program makes me feel good,” and “Will you be here next week?” They ask us to be faithful.
- Build relationships with the agencies served.
- Gather support via friends, family, church, community, and others.
- Listen with an open mind, heart and ear to those people we serve.
- Let music and singing accompany the journey.
- Lead with love!

HHH has come a long way since its inception. In the past year we have impacted over 5000 people through various venues including weekly sessions, performances and special events. With God’s help and the faithful support of many, HHH will continue to grow as a strong, viable and creative healing tool for the homeless and underserved in the Chicago area.

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*Marge Nykaza, M.P.S., CCMHP is the founder and executive director of HARMONY, HOPE & HEALING. As a professional singer, pastoral musician, and educator, Ms. Nykaza shares her gift and love of music with many communities throughout the Chicago area and abroad. She has been director of music for several parishes on the south-side of Chicago, resource speaker and member of the Archdiocese of Chicago music staff, and teacher at two Catholic high schools. She has a Bachelor of Music from Eastern Illinois University, advanced vocal training at DePaul University, and a Masters in Pastoral Studies from Loyola University, Chicago. She studied Cross-Cultural Healing Music in Healthcare and Education at the Open Ear Center in Seattle, WA. In 2007, she received her certification as a Cross-Cultural Music Healing Practitioner. She is currently pursuing a Doctorate in Ministry from Graduate Theological Foundation.*

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