

# SINGING OUR PRESENCE

*The Portland Gay Men's Chorus celebrates 15 years of touching hearts and changing minds through music*

by Inga Sorensen

**I**magine you're about to sing the national anthem before thousands upon thousands of Portland Trailblazers fans. The throng is rowdy and revved up, and some of its members are probably a bit buzzed—thanks to the beer they're now allowed to drink during home games at the new Rose Garden arena.

That prospect should be nerve-racking enough, right? Well, now imagine you're a member of the Portland Gay Men's Chorus, which has been invited to perform the anthem. For emotional support you are flanked by 55 of your gay choral colleagues, but you still wonder, "What's going to happen when we're introduced over the loudspeaker: 'Now here to perform our national anthem is the Portland Gay Men's Chorus...'"

Pondering the range of potential crowd responses is a bit unsettling. But for the chorus, which is celebrating its 15th anniversary this year, breaking new ground—and taking risks—is par for the course.

"I remember when PGMC went to Coos Bay to sing. This was during the Measure 9 campaign. Some folks showed up with big banners and signs saying things like 'Homosexuality is a sin,'" recounts Tom Norton, who has been a chorus member for 14 years. "It was distressing, but the chorus just started singing and within five minutes those people put their signs down. We have a way of disarming people through our music. It's a very nonthreatening way of saying to the world that we are proud of who we are and *this* is who we are—not those evil stereotypes presented by the OCA."

As with human rights movements throughout history, the Portland Gay Men's Chorus uses music to celebrate its identity and community. In doing so, it also becomes a catalyst for social change, which is an inherently risky assignment. But Norton and other chorus members say that risk-taking is simply an intrinsic feature of being out—especially when one is going to sing that truth loudly and with dignity.

"I guess you could say we've put ourselves on the line," Norton says. For instance, there was the time when PGMC [and the much younger Portland Lesbian Choir] journeyed to Springfield, Ore., after voters in that conservative blue-collar community approved the nation's first law barring a city from enacting civil rights protections for gay men and lesbians. The local measure passed in May 1992, and in October—during the fieriest days of the statewide Ballot Measure 9 campaign—the singers performed at a Springfield theater as part of its "We Sing Out!" tour.

That act was potentially hazardous, in light of the fact that hate crimes across Oregon were skyrocketing and tension gripped every corner of the state. Though there were no anti-gay incidents reported during the show, the following week the theater became the target of a hate crime, when vandals spray-painted racial epithets and the word "yes" across a window sign that called on voters to reject Measure 9.

Back in 1983, the Portland Gay Men's Chorus was the center of controversy when it held its first concert in a Portland public high school auditorium. Spurred on by local fundamentalist preachers, callers reportedly jammed the phone lines at Cleveland High School and Portland Public Schools protesting the performance. Two years later, anti-gay picketers made their presence felt during a chorus concert at Benson High School.

And let us not forget that memorable occasion



Kate Sullivan and the Chorus sing at Lesbian and Gay Pride

THE PORTLAND GAY MEN'S CHORUS  
Presents:  
**ZILLIONS!**  
*Or: How We Paid Off The National Debt*  
AN ORIGINAL MUSICAL COMPOSED BY TOM SIMONDS

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when state Rep. John Minnis (R-Wood Village), an evangelical Christian, turned his back on the chorus—as a symbolic gesture, he said—when it performed on the floor of the Oregon House.

"Sure we loved to sing, but at the heart of PGMC was always, always politics, at least from my perspective," says Steve Fulmer, an accomplished choral performer who became the chorus' first general manager in the early 1980s.

"For us to go up on stage and sing about being gay was revolutionary. That just wasn't being done," says Norton. "We knew that having 'gay' in our title was very important. There are a lot of gay choruses, such as the Idaho Freedom Singers

or the Turtle Creek Chorale in Dallas, that won't do that."

Norton, a retired helicopter pilot who suffered a stroke within a few months of a helicopter crash two decades ago, says, "It's a miracle I'm alive today." He credits PGMC with being a healthy and sustaining force in his life. Throughout the years he has served the chorus in a number of capacities, including as its rehearsal manager and public relations chair.

"Like so many men in the chorus, I wanted to be involved in something positive. I knew PGMC could make a difference," he says.

Fulmer, who is director of information ser-

vices for Portland Public Schools, adds: "We wanted to sing our presence."

## Overture

Let the record show that the Portland Gay Men's Chorus was conceived over a pitcher of beer one night at the long-gone and much missed gay hangout Wilde Oscar's," wrote PGMC member Richard Brown in 1990, recounting the chorus' first decade.

That informal gathering took place in 1980. A fellow by the name of Mark Richards had just returned from a trip to San Francisco where he was awed by a performance of the San Francisco Gay Men's Chorus, which was founded in 1976 and had already developed a solid reputation. Inspired, Richards came back to Portland where he met with Gary Coleman, then music director of Metropolitan Community Church, and Mark Jones, who would become the Portland Gay Men's Chorus' first conductor.

Following that meeting at Wilde Oscar's, Coleman decided to place an ad in the Portland Town Council newsletter (PTC, an early gay and lesbian rights group, was the forerunner to Right To Privacy, Phoenix Rising Foundation and Cascade AIDS Project) seeking other gay men who were interested in choral singing. Fourteen men showed up for the rehearsal, including Fulmer.

"I went to that rehearsal and I was in tears by what I felt. I knew immediately that this was going

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