



PHOTO BY ATHENA DELENE

SISTERS OF THE WORLD

The **Soromundi Lesbian Chorus of Eugene** had its humble origins in the home of Eugene native Karm Hagedorn and her partner, Sheryl Bernheine. "We just wanted to sing with some folks," Hagedorn says, recalling that, at first, the casual choir was just "six of us in our living room and, amazingly, it went from there."

The group met weekly and, according to Hagedorn, "friends invited friends" until the choir's numbers swelled to a baker's dozen and then some. "By January of '90, we were about 17 members strong and performed for the first time at the Unitarian Universalist Church in Eugene, at the Sunday service," she says. "From there, our next performance was International Women's Day on March 8. By then there were about 30 of us."

A quarter of a century later and Soromundi has become something of a Eugene institution — an organization at once cultural, artistic and political. What began as an informal gathering of women joining voices in song has grown into a celebration and a statement of solidarity in the ongoing battle for civil rights.

"Obviously, there was a need," Hagedorn says of Soromundi's early evolution into a coalition for women's rights. "Right away the choir became more than just singing, and I think the need for what's about to come next was even greater than the need for women having a place to sing. Soromundi became a community."

What came next, she says, was the establishment of the Oregon Citizens Alliance, the group founded by religious whack job Lon Mabon that sought, through Measure 9, to repeal an executive order banning discrimination based on sexual orientation. "It felt like an onslaught of never-ending discriminatory measures," Hagedorn recalls. "We were around for all that. Whenever there was a rally or protest of any kind, Soromundi was there."

Soromundi, the name of a star which translates as "sisters of the world," is a non-auditioned choir, which means any woman who wants to sing can join. "Given that, we sound amazing," Hagedorn says, thanks in large part to the addition in 1994 of artistic director Lisa Helleln, a Ph.D. who brought a strong talent for teaching and arranging songs. Every April, members get together to select the next season's musical lineup, which can range from Broadway fare and folk to interpretations of Lady Gaga and Radiohead's "Creep."

Along with annual gigs at Lane Community College, the Eugene Holiday Market and a May concert at the Hult Center, the almost 90 members of Soromundi are ready to sing at any event, especially when it's in support of gay and lesbian rights. "We have the 'personal-as-political' in our veins," Hagedorn says, noting that the recent Supreme Court ruling on gay marriage is encouraging, but hardly the end of the battle. "While things have gotten considerably easier, we will still respond when that need arises."

Reflecting on Soromundi's 25 years in existence, Hagedorn says one of the most impressive aspects of the choir, aside from its strong performances, is how it functions as an ongoing network of support for women. "It just kind of marched along," she says of the choir's growth over the years. "I never dreamt that that little meeting in our living room would turn into this giant community of women that probably encompasses, I would say, up to 1,000 women as singers in the chorus."

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