



Fort Lauderdale Gay Men's Chorus Builds Community On Stage and Off

BY LEON M. RUBIN

To fans of Broadway musicals and the cabaret world, Barbara Cook is nothing short of legendary. During a career that spans five decades, Cook originated the role of Marian the Librarian in the original Broadway cast of Meredith Willson's *The Music Man*, was the first female pop singer to be presented in concert by New York's Metropolitan Opera Company and has performed half a dozen solo concerts at Carnegie Hall.

So, how significant is it that Cook accepted an invitation to appear in concert on October 22 with the Fort Lauderdale Gay Men's Chorus to kick off the group's 22nd season? *Very significant.*

"We're heading into a whole new era," says the chorus' president, William Spinosa. "We are attracting members with incredible musical backgrounds and theater backgrounds. It has been an amazing thing to see the metamorphosis of the group. And that gives us new opportunities – like performing with Barbara Cook."

Adds Todd Wiley, the chorus' director since 2002, "The concert with Barbara Cook is one more step in awareness and understanding of what we do. We want to get more into the mainstream. People are buying tickets and coming to see us – so we want to give them a product that we can be proud of."

The oldest gay performing arts organization in the State of Florida, the Fort Lauderdale Gay Men's Chorus was established in 1986 with inspiration from such groundbreaking organizations as the New York City Gay Men's Chorus and the Chicago Gay Men's Chorus. Its mission is simply stated – but somewhat more challenging to achieve: "To build community through quality musical performances that promote a world that accepts and values diversity."

Indeed, building community is one of the things the chorus does best – both within the membership ranks and on a much broader scale.

Fort Lauderdale Gay Men's Chorus 2007-2008 Season

An Evening with Barbara Cook
October 22, 8 p.m.

Holiday Treasures
December 19, 8 p.m.

South Florida Choral Festival
February 9, 8 p.m.

Rockin' with the Rhythm
June 21 and 22, 8 p.m.

All performances take place
at the Broward Center for
the Performing Arts

For tickets and information,
visit www.ftlqmc.org

Time and time again, conversations about the chorus lead quickly to the word "family." As Spinosa explains it, "We are a family. We are such a diverse group of guys. Some are pushing 80 and some are 21. We are from all backgrounds and professions. Some are single and some have been in relationships for 30 years. This is a way for us to bond."

The feeling of family is strongly encouraged. In fact, Wiley points out, the chorus holds an annual retreat that is led by a corporate team-builder at a location that's far enough away from home to minimize distractions and encourage focus.

"While the chorus still provides a social function, the camaraderie among the members and the support they give each other are remarkable. Amazing friendships have come out of it," Wiley says.

There are plenty of opportunities for the sense of community to build. The full group rehearses once a week, and there are additional rehearsals for individual sections of the chorus as well as for the dancers. "They work hard. I expect a lot out of them," Wiley notes. "We have high standards to meet."

During the past three years or so, chorus members have been spreading their good feelings beyond the confines of their Sunshine Cathedral rehearsal space and their Broward Center for the Performing Arts performance venues. "One of the

biggest things we've done recently – and this is a personal goal for me – is to get involved in the community," Wiley says. The chorus has performed at the opening ceremonies for AIDS Walk Fort Lauderdale and the South Florida Carbonell regional theater awards, for example, and was the first gay chorus to sing the National Anthem at a Florida Marlins game.

On a smaller, but no less important level, the group has sung carols at local nursing homes and hospices and provided food, gifts and holiday cheer for children at Broward House and Joe Dimaggio Children's Hospital. "We want to do more of that," Wiley states. "Community involvement is

an important aspect of what we do now. We see the impact that we can have." Future plans include the formation of a chorus for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender youth and the inauguration of a scholarship program.

The group also has toured to Scandinavia and is planning a South American tour in 2009. And looking even farther ahead, efforts are underway to commission a choral work for the chorus' 25th anniversary season in 2010.

Above all, though, it's about the show – and it keeps getting better and better. "We very much want to entertain our audience in a broader way," Wiley explains, adding that the upcoming concert with Barbara Cook will also feature two dozen dancers and a 40-piece orchestra. "We are striving for excellence."

Bill Spinosa echoes the same theme. "The community at large gets to see a really powerful, professional performance. We do really good work. It's not just a bunch of guys standing up and singing.

"For both the straight and the gay community, this is an opportunity to see gay men in a completely different light – without the stereotypes," he continues. "We want to make a statement. We put on a great show, and we happen to be gay." ★

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director of Cultural Quarterly*

