

Uplifting Voices

FOR BENJAMIN RODRIGUEZ '18, THE BLACK CELESTIAL Choral Ensemble (BCCE) provides a home away from home. This sense of home and family is shared by many other members of the gospel choir. "This is the place I found the people who make me feel similar to the way I feel at home—surrounded by love, positivity, acceptance," says Rodriguez, a sociology and education dual major.

Currently in its 41st year, the BCCE is a student-run gospel choir that holds concerts during many campus events, performs at churches, and sometimes competes. Some events, such as engagements with other churches, vary from year to year. Under the Hendricks Chapel umbrella, the ensemble also has several staple commitments: Gospel Mania (a gospel music festival), Spring Break tour, and a performance at the Martin Luther King Jr. Celebration to name a few.

While the size of the choir tends to fluctuate annually, both a small group and a large group have their advantages. For instance, Rodriguez explains that when just 10 people are up on stage singing a song, you can feel a certain energy. However, some events require larger groups to participate. The BCCE is working to expand campus outreach through a more open audition process, which allows students to become a part of the choir at any point during the semester.

Throughout such changes, the BCCE is supported by an active alumni group. Rodriguez thinks that's part of why the alumni are there. "To keep us going, especially at our lowest," he says. BCCE director Ashleigh Brown '14 shares a similar view on the alumni's importance. They serve as a reminder of the choir's foundational goals- to provide a voice and create a spiritual home, says Brown, who notes that the ensemble welcomes all ethnicities and races. For Brown and BCCE member Orlando Watson '19, this connection makes them feel like part of an enduring tradition. "You look back at the history of the choir, even how it was started, and it's rich," says Watson, an anthropology major. "We're leaving our mark on something that's been going on for so long right now. It's this legacy we're making our impact on in the present."

The Choir's Beginnings

The BCCE was founded in the spring of 1977. Driven by the feeling that black students needed a spiritual home on campus, Seretta McKnight '80 and classmate Lawrence Ford '80 connected with longtime SU administrator Barry Wells, who was then the director of the Office of Minority Affairs. After much consultation, they invited others and a group McKnight refers to as the "Magnificent Seven," came to be, including: McKnight, Ford, Ervin C. Allgood '82, Pamela Hayes, Hermione "JJ" James, Cheryl Lane '78, and Parrese Wade '81. "One of the very things that was culturally integral to my own development and so many others is the ability to identify through music," says McKnight, who describes gospel music as her "anchor," noting the group was composed of like-minded people who felt the campus needed this type of outlet. While faith drove the group, McKnight says many different spiritualities were represented in the choir when it began, even those lacking in their belief. She also notes that 1977 was a turbulent year for the

country, and over time the choir simply evolved to where that faith became embedded in the group's purpose. "The reality is that it was the idea of how music could bring together and cross all types of barriers, real and imagined, between young people," McKnight says. According to BCCE alumna Dakota (Caine) Holman '83, who joined the choir in 1979, the group provided a sense of belonging for minorities. Her husband, Victor Holman '82, who joined the choir in 1978, notes that despite change over the years, the BCCE has stayed true to its roots. He describes the choir as a "living legacy."

Coming to nearly every BCCE event since she graduated, BCCE alumna Laurie Kingsberry '82 believes it's important for current members and alumni to connect. At a Coming Back Together event in 2014, Kingsberry learned the BCCE needed financial support and desired to help them fundraise. According to both Kingsberry and McKnight, an act of God brought them together at a stoplight that same year. Ironically, just as Kingsberry was telling a story to a guest passenger about spending time at McKnight's church nearby, she spotted McKnight sitting at the light adjacent to her. After screaming and beeping her horn, Kingsberry got McKnight's attention. "I told her I had something on my heart that I wanted to try do for the Black Celestial Choral Ensemble," Kingsberry says.

Continuing the Legacy

Through their reconnection, they established The Alumni Group (TAG BCCE) and launched a fundraising campaign called "Legacy Lives" in 2015 to create an endowment to aid the choir financially and ensure its future. Thanks to both alumni and other supporters, the campaign is halfway to its \$50,000 goal, which they hope to reach this year. According to McKnight, once the campaign concludes, the relationships that the BCCE has formed will continue to strengthen.

For the BCCE, the mission to share and grow in faith has served as a constant throughout the years. They seek to uplift the name of Jesus Christ, but membership is not limited to a specific faith. According to Victor Holman, the style of the gospel music might evolve, but the spiritual message is key to the choir's relevancy. BCCE member Deresha Hayles '19 says that before some events they'll remind themselves that each song is not merely a song, but might also minister to someone out there. "If it makes one person believe they aren't alone in this big world, then we are doing the job we have set out to do," says Hayles, an African American studies major.

Whether on stage or in the presence of other BCCE members, she feels "warmth within her," a sense of love and security—a reassurance that this is a place where she belongs. "What they've given me, I want us to be able to share that with others as well." Victor Holman and McKnight note a similar passion in BCCE members. Holman says it comes from within, that they truly want to perform. As McKnight points out, you don't need to be a singer to join the BCCE. "All you need is a heart and a willingness," she says.

—Gina Reitenauer

Source: Syracuse University Magazine Spring 2018
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