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Another Opening, Another Show

By Charles Harper

Westborough: They opened in June 1971. When the curtain goes up at the Gibbons Middle School December 5, it will be the fifty-first show presented by the Westborough Community Chorus. Faith Newark has directed fifty chorus shows. In a telephone interview she said it all started when she was approached by Jim Harvey and Bill Barrett. The two enjoyed singing, had sung in a chorus celebrating the town's, 250th anniversary. "They wanted to continue singing but were turned off from joining other existing choruses requiring singers audition and be able to read music. In addition both were interested in singing popular folk and patriotic songs. They didn't want to do the long hair stuff. Jim had a beautiful voice and Bill was no slouch" Faith said. As organist and choir director at the Congregational Church, Faith understood where Jim Harvey and Bill Barrett were coming from. "I had four choirs. I understood many times people have good voices. and can sing well but can't read a note of music. Bringing people together to sing in a chorus is a matter of osmosis. They help and learn from each other" said Faith.

In agreeing to direct the chorus Faith laid down some rules. Music folders were not allowed on stage. This dictum meant every singer had to memorize the words and music of up to twenty songs performed in a show. This was an unusual step. Choristers are never without their music to lean on. The prestigious Tanglewood Chorus of the Boston Symphony Orchestra and the Mormon Tabernacle Choir serve as examples. While not criticizing other choral groups Faith said she views it as important there be a bond between performers and the audience. "I feel folders get in the way of this happening. Doing without them makes a difference in the way the audience responds," Faith said. A second innovation Faith brought to the chorus and choral singing was to make each performance a show business production with a theme and sets. Cardboard, wood, hay bales, rocking chairs, furniture and a variety of objects were integrated into each production. In the song about Charley on the MTA, Charlie rode in a cardboard cutout of a trolley car. Toyland was recreated for Christmas shows. A slide show of Americana accompanied an enthusiastic rendering of "The Battle Hymn of the Republic". "Sets are another way of drawing the audience into the show," Faith said. She credits set designer Jane Kruse for coming up with eye-appealing sets and chorus members for hammering, painting and gluing things together. "Jane is such a talent she should be designing sets on Broadway." Faith said.

Sets led to costumes. Outfitting chorus members to fit particular characters became an integral part of each production. Faith gives credit to designer Jane Kruse and the many chorus members over the years who sewed and stitched to make the garments. Thinking back to the chorus' beginning Faith said the town loaned them \$200 or \$250 to get started. The money went to buy music and was soon repaid. A committee was formed. The idea took off and became reality when fifty sopranos, altos, tenors and basses joined in the chorus' first show in June 1971. Faith remembers it was so hot on the stage subsequent spring shows were moved to May. Enthusiasm over the first show brought an interest in mounting a Christmas production. In all but one year beginning in 1971 the chorus has mounted two shows. The one exception was a spring show canceled when chorus members, not wanting to impose on Faith because she suffered back problems, voted not to go through with a scheduled production. Faith notes she wanted the show to go on.

Faith pays tribute to chorus members past and present. She says two shows a year requires a lot in the way of commitment. Rehearsals for the spring show in May begins in early January. Rehearsals for the Christmas show begin soon after Labor Day and continue through November. Rehearsals escalate in the week leading up to the May and December productions. Then they are held every evening beginning Monday up to the opening curtain. Sixty choristers will perform this year's Christmas show. Past productions have seen as many as ninety members on stage. Another facet of the chorus is proceeds from ticket sales make possible music scholarships for private music lessons for students of junior high and high school age. Awards are given in memory of deceased chorus members. "Anytime you can entertain people and bring joy into their lives makes it all worthwhile," said Faith. "But it wouldn't happen without an awful lot of dedication and work by hundreds of people who have made the chorus possible over these many years". When the curtain rises on the chorus' 26th annual Christmas show December 5, Faith Newark will be on the sidelines making progress in a battle against cancer. Chorus members voted to title the show "A Celebration of Faith". Susan Menzel, director of the bell choir at the Congregational Church, will conduct "A Celebration of Faith". As for Faith, she has her sights set on May 1998 when she plans to direct the chorus in its annual spring show. Rehearsals begin in early January.