



FROM LIFE SUPPORT TO THIRD PLACE

HOW ONE TEACHER REVIVED SHOW CHOIR IN IDAHO

by Rosalind Fournier

Before Sadie Christiansen arrived as choir director for Shelley School District in Shelley, Idaho, the choir programs were on life support. She would be directing four choirs from 6th grade through high school—including the show choir at Shelley High School, which hadn't competed for longer than anyone could remember.





PHOTO BY JOHN BURROUGHS

“Choir had a reputation,” Christiansen says, “and it wasn’t a good one.”

Job one was to change that. “I put all of my efforts into shifting the culture of choir to being a group that looks out for others, works hard, and is a place that people genuinely want to be.”

Over that first year, she succeeded beyond her wildest dreams—especially in show choir, which required a full revival. Christiansen started the year with nine kids who quickly spread the word and recruited their friends; by the end of the year, the Sentinels Show Choir boasted 20 enthusiastic performers.

Christiansen’s Journey

Christiansen grew up in Utah and spent four years performing with the show choir at American Leadership Academy, the only competitive high-school show choir in the state. It was led by the award-winning concert- and show-choir director Rick Lunt. “My experience in the group was so profound,” she says, “that I knew if I had a chance to change the lives of

kids the way mine was changed by show choir, I wanted to do it.”

Christiansen went on to earn her Bachelor of Music in Secondary Choral Education at Southern Utah University. She did her student teaching at Shelley School District and took a year off to care for her new baby before accepting the choir-director position there.

Her long-term goal was always to make the Sentinels a competitive show choir, but this wasn’t an easy sell at first in a state that didn’t have a single competitive show choir. She remembers bringing it up during her interview. “They asked me about the particulars of competitive show choir,” Christiansen says, “and I mentioned traveling, costumes, and choreography, and the administration was a little wide eyed. Their reaction was, ‘Yeah, we don’t have anything like that.’”

One way Christiansen overcame their skepticism was to “show up with financial solutions rather than asking them for money to make it happen.”

Getting parents on board was another challenge. “They were probably the hardest to convince, because there is no concept of competitive show choir here,” she says. “They have nothing to go off of, so for them it was almost a huge trust fall that the experience was going to be worthwhile for their children, and worth the money they would spend to be a part of it.”

Standing in front of those eager kids, looking at the massive task ahead, Christiansen admits she had a moment of panic. “I said, ‘I might be really in over my head on this one. Is this really going to work?’ But I jumped in with both feet, and promised my students that if they were willing to trust me, they would be part of an experience they would never have anywhere else. I let my passion for it show, I danced with them, sang with them, and when we did team building, I was in the middle of it with them. I fundraised alongside them, and before I knew it they were empowered to do more.”

Her first group of students was small

but enthusiastic. “They were begging for a challenge, and I was thrilled to give them one.”

It didn’t take long for the community to come around. The support she received from volunteers and the students themselves buoyed the program almost immediately. The first year, Christiansen had two volunteer choreographers—one from the local community and another, remarkably enough, who had been in show choir with Christiansen in high school. “I partnered with them to give my students a choreography experience they had never had before,” Christiansen says. “We had three songs with a simple theme, and I used that as the way to introduce them into the idea of how a show choir functions. I showed them videos of competitive groups and they were blown away. They decided that was what they wanted.”

Christiansen also found support from less expected sources: the athletic director and superintendent petitioned the school board for money to buy risers, and in the summer between year one and year two, Shelley High School held its first summer

Her first group of students was small but enthusiastic. “They were begging for a challenge, and I was thrilled to give them one.”

Over 100
shapes for all
occasions!

★
FREE
Brochures

★
FREE
Shipping

**FUN
PASTA**
FUNDRAISING



LEARN MORE
OR SIGN UP NOW!
1-800-247-0188

UP TO
50%
PROFIT!

WWW.FUNPASTAFUNDRAISING.COM

MANHASSET®

Lifetime
Warranty

Stands



Quality and innovation since 1935.

*Look for the
original!*

NEW!



**Manhasset Chorale®
Microphone Stand**
(Model #3016)

Many great colors to choose from!



LED Lamp II
(Model #1060)



**Matte Finish
Symphony Stand**
(Model #4801-MGR)



NEW!

**Noteworthy
Music Stand**

Available in 12 Styles

**OVER
5
MILLION
SOLD**



NEW!

Symphony Music Stand
(Model #48)

Available in 20 Colors



MANHASSETSTANDS.COM



**"Looking at your group
and deciding what
success will look like for
them is important."**

choreography camp. "I could not have done this so quickly without the students and administration willing to support us—support my vision—so wholeheartedly," she says.

The First Competition— Four Years Earlier than Anyone Expected

With momentum building, Christiansen set her sights on having a choir that was competition-ready within five years. Instead, "the students worked hard to make it happen in one," she says.

To prepare, she says, "looking at your group and deciding what success will look like for them is important. I had a choir of 20 kids, and that included strong Tenor/Bass voices. I decided they could handle SATB voicing (an arrangement of

soprano, alto, tenor, and bass combined); they could handle some traditional show choir choreography; and therefore they could handle a competitive show. It was an expectation that would push them, but it was attainable."

Christiansen was savvy about finding show costumes that fit the show as well as the budget and recruited wood shop and welding teachers and students to help build the sets. Even the math department helped, providing measurements and blueprints. "Not only did it take things off my plate, but it got more of the school involved in what we were doing. This leans into the opportunities of starting from scratch—you have an awesome opportunity to change the culture of your school, your community, and your district just by asking for help that isn't solely based on money."

They did, however need money—lots of it—to offset the fees parents would be required to pay, and raising it required a variety of efforts. They used Snap! Raise, a company through which students set up profiles and request donations from family and friends (the company keeps a small percentage of the money in return for the service). Show choir members also worked shifts and at the scone booth at the state fair and did a fundraiser night at a local pizzeria. Christiansen applied for grants to the Kiwanis club and the school Booster Club, and finally they received sponsorships from a dance studio and doctor in the area.

Their first competition was the Hart Encore Competition in California, where they competed against four other groups of similar size. “We were ready to take last place, knowing that we were newbies to the scene and have a long way to go,” Christiansen remembers. “Yet they brought home a third-place trophy and a whole new understanding (of competition), and I couldn't be more proud of them. My students would probably say that after they went to competition for the first time, they finally understood the things I was trying to tell them about elements such as diction, expression, and having sharper movements to their dancing, among other things. But most importantly they would say that they poured their blood, sweat, and tears into a show and came off that stage proud of the performance they put on, and proud of what they've started here in our community.”

Looking Ahead

With the start of Christiansen's third year, the Sentinels are getting ready to put on the biggest homecoming halftime show the school has ever had by using a show choir arrangement in combination with a performance with the marching band, drill team, cheer team, show choir, and drama classes. “It takes a little creativity, but I am always blown away by how excited people get to participate,” she says.

This year they're also preparing for their next competition show: “The Ballad of Petals and Ash.” Meanwhile, Christiansen says she's continuing to work on building the program. “I am lucky enough to be my own feeder teacher,” she says. “I hope that in a few years I can start a middle school show choir that feeds my high school program more reliably. The younger siblings of my current students are eager for their chance to do what they see their older siblings doing, which is one of the best compliments I could receive!”

She's still working on new funding sources, as well. “In a perfect world, we would get some year-to-year sponsors who could make it possible for us to compete two or three times in a season, but that might be a ways off. Currently, we do everything we can to perform for other schools around us to hopefully encourage other show choirs to start up in our own area. That might be a fever dream, but you never know! My top priority is that when I have students joining show choir they are proud of the shows they put on. Those trophies are awesome to bring home, but the experiences are what they take with them forever.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Rosalind Fournier is a freelance writer/editor in Homewood, Alabama where she lives with her husband and kids. She loves to read and looks forward to March Madness every year, though her bracket is usually a disaster.