

Midwest Harmony Alliance
A New Kind of Barbershop Mass Chorus
History

In early 2011, Carl Missele, and I decided to approach the City of Elgin, IL and request financial support to stage a summer Barbershop Show at one of Elgin's beautiful city parks. We were concerned that our Fox Valley Men of Harmony chorus would be hard pressed to put on a 90-minute show without some help so we approached our friends in Schaumburg's Brotherhood Chorus and Rockford's Second City Chorus with a request. If they performed on this Summer Evening Show, we would split the fee from Elgin and the Illinois Arts Council. They agreed to join us for a hot, Sunday afternoon concert at Lords Park on the east side of Elgin where we sang from a pavilion porch to the audience below. The crowd was small, the music was quite good especially the three or four songs at the end of the concert when all three choruses took the stage to imitate a real mass chorus. The mass chorus seed was planted.

In 2012, we requested City of Elgin to schedule our trio of choruses for a July evening HarmonyFest in the Wing Park Bandshell on Elgin's west side. We expanded the mass chorus segment at the end of the concert and sang a couple of patriotic songs that were very well-received. The seedling was growing.

In 2013, Elgin gladly scheduled the HarmonyFest for the same July evening. We asked Arlington Heights and the Rockford Metro Chapters to join our trio of choruses and they agreed. Also invited was the Easy Days Quartet from Greendale, WI. Mike Bagby emceed. Each chorus performed a song set and then our massed chorus took over and amped up the sound and quality. Over pizza after the concert, a few of the performers asked me why we didn't offer this massed chorus to more parks during the summer. Thus the idea of the Northern Illinois Barbershop Chapters (NIBC) Mass Chorus was budding.

In 2014, the NIBC Mass Chorus organized itself and invited a half dozen more chapters to join in. We scheduled separate Spring rehearsals for those Chapters west of the Fox River and east of the Fox River. Then we held a full rehearsal in Elgin in early June. In late June we staged a Show to a full house in Rockford at the Sinnissippi Park Bandshell. Greg Martin emceed this event. Then we staged the Elgin HarmonyFest in July at Wing Park in July. It was again emceed by Mike Bagby. By then our massed chorus was in full bloom.

After this performance the various Chapter reps asked us to choose 2015 new songs by the end of 2014 to expand the learning period and give the massed chorus a name that would be a marketable brand. In late 2014, we presented the various Chapter Music Directors with a long list of peppy, popular Barbershop Titles/Arrangements and asked them to pick their top five numbers. We narrowed the overall list to a dozen songs and had the Directors vote on their favorites via

a website. By the end of 2014, we had the six new 2015 songs selected. Similarly we put out a call for a new chorus name and were deluged by ideas.

In the Fall of 2014, the Illinois Barbershop Harmony Society District canceled its scheduled Chapter Leadership Training Day in central Illinois for lack of interest. In early 2015 our NIBC Executive group (Carl Missele, Syl Wetle and Bill Miller) decided that we needed to support the new Northern Illinois Chapter's leaders so we committed to organize and hold a **Leadership Summit on Sat, Jan 24, 2015 in Elgin**. Thirty-three men attended this day long session, which also highlighted the merits of belonging to the NIBC Massed Chorus. These leadership courses were taught by qualified, experienced, past, and present District Officers. The Illinois District agreed to pay for half of the Summit expenses. Little did we know that this Summit would ignite more interest in joining NIBC Mass Chorus but it did.

Near the end of the summit we asked the students to help us pick a new Massed Chorus name by voting on their favorite names from a list of two-dozen names and then suggest some names of their own. Based on this exercise, a long list of names was reviewed in a Feb, 2015 meeting of Chapter Reps and Music Directors in Elgin. The list was gradually reduced until only a few names remained. The chorus name "Harmony Alliance" was favored by most attendees but then someone suggested adding the word "Midwest" (from two other names) and the deal was sealed with unanimous agreement. The new name for the NIBC Mass Chorus was adopted:

Midwest Harmony Alliance (MHA)

In Spring of 2015, there was much optimism among the MHA Executive Group that we could book MHA into at least three summer concerts. In April, Rockford Second City's MHA rep informed us that a repeat of the Rockford Sinnissippi was not in the cards due to a rotation of talent through this summer program. We then targeted Hoffman Estates and DeKalb Park Districts for summer dates. Hoffman Estate's review panel requested a video recording of an MHA performance which we luckily found. Our rendition of "Heart of My Heart" may not have excited them. DeKalb accepted our proposal but balked at our fee. They only book free performances so we declined to set this precedent as we have very legitimate expenses for rehearsal venue rental etc.

In March and April partial MHA Chorus rehearsals were held on weekday evenings in Rockford, Schaumburg and Elgin.

On Saturday, June 13, 2015 MHA held a successful six-hour rehearsal in FUMC and a Flash Mob Performance at the Gail Borden Library in downtown Elgin. This intense rehearsal was schedule to accommodate participation by interested singers from Chicago to Rock Island, IL. The goal of this rehearsal was to refine

our musical and physical performance of our repertoire to improve the quality of our performance.

Our July 21, 2015 Elgin HarmonyFest Performance was a resounding success as Mike Bagby MC'd this Show for the third year in a row.

MHA requested to be the "Mike Test Chorus" for the Illinois District Chorus Competition in Bloomington, IL in September, 2015. This request was accepted by the Chief District Judge. The spirited MHA performance was well accepted by real Barbershoppers.

In the Fall of 2015, the Illinois Barbershop Harmony Society District canceled its scheduled Chapter Leadership Training Day in central Illinois for lack of interest. In late 2015 our MHA Executive group (Carl Missele, Syl Wetle and Bill Miller) decided that we needed to support Chapter leaders in all of Illinois, Western Iowa and Southern Wisconsin so we committed to hold a **Leadership Summit on Sat, Jan 16, 2016 in Elgin**. Sixty-five men from 14 Chapters in 3 States attended this day-long session, which also highlighted the merits of belonging to the MHA Massed Chorus. These leadership courses were taught by qualified, experienced, past, and present Chapter and District Officers. We applied for grants to underwrite Summit expenses to BHS Harmony Foundation and IL District IDEA. Neither Grant Request was successful. The Illinois District agreed to pay expenses not covered by a nominal \$5/person charge.

In July 2016 MHA staged its fifth annual Elgin HarmonyFest in the Wing Park Bandshell and was joined by a women's Barbershop ensemble that provided a nice sound and needed vocal variety.

In late summer 2016, the District President asked the MHA President to join the District Board and assume the role of Vice President of Chapter Leadership Training. I accepted the position because MHA had provided the only Chapter Leader Training in Illinois for the previous two years and I also wanted to espouse the value of the multi-chapter massed chorus as a vehicle for sustaining and strengthening fragile area chapters.

On January 14, 2017, MHA hosted its third annual Leadership Summit in Elgin at FUMC. We invited the Barbershop Harmony Society to provide two reputable trainers for our Summit. BHS CEO Marty Munson taught our Presidents' Class and Christian Hunter taught our Chapter Development VP's. Over 45 men attended this Summit and provided excellent reviews.

In late 2016, the MHA Leadership announced five new crowd-pleasing songs would be added to expand the 2017 MHA Repertoire. More MHA performance events were pursued for the 2017 season. The Rockford Second City Chorus contracted MHA to perform on the second half of its Fall Show on Oct 14, 2017. Another contract with the City of Elgin, IL for a July, 2017 HarmonyFest was

signed and sealed. A fund-raiser MHA performance is being planned for a Rockford, IL church in November, 2017.

In June, 2017 MHA held it's annual Saturday morning all massed chorus rehearsal in Elgin, IL and then followed it up with the first-ever **Jollity**. A **Jollity** is a monthly Saturday morning get together of Barbershoppers to sing the old songs, woodshed, have fun and a bite to eat.

In the Spring of 2017, the MHA Leadership Team decided to take another step to help Chapters by hosting a brand-new event called **ABCDEF: A Barbershop Chorus Director's Educational Forum**. The purpose of this Forum is to provide an opportunity for chorus directors, associate or assistant directors, would be directors, arm wavers, wanna-be's, and song leaders (30 in all) to participate in an open forum, round table discussion to build musical support network in a non-competitive environment. Also there will be presentations of techniques and methods by qualified BHS instructors and live chorus practices. The initial **ABCDEF is scheduled for August 26, 2017** in the western Chicago, IL suburbs. The cost of this Forum will be split among participants and the IL District.

Our fourth annual MHA/IL District Leadership Summit is being planned for January 2018.

Our contact list now includes over 150 members in 18 BHS Chapters, in Illinois, Wisconsin and Iowa.

Revised and augmented by Bill Miller
Jun 25, 2017

Note : FUMC is First United Methodist Church in Downtown Elgin



**Midwest Harmony Alliance Mass Chorus
in Concert at 2014 Elgin HarmonyFest**

Current MHA Music Directors

**Doug Smith
Joe Tomecek
Brian Cromer**