

Reunion concert marks 50th anniversary of Michigan Youth for Understanding Chorale
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By Sarah Harbison

sharbison@citpat.com -- 768-4924

For more than 1,000 high school students in Michigan, it was the trip of a lifetime.

Participants in the Michigan Youth for Understanding Chorale from 1958-1973 spent about two months in either Europe or South America -- singing their way through a foreign land and leaving an impression of Americans that could not be forgotten.

``It's a very intense thing, because we were gone 51 days," said Gail Huntoon Roberts, who traveled to South America in 1961, and was among the dozens of Jackson teens tapped for the chorale. ``We traveled all over the place. You are giving multiple concerts every day, you are spending so much time with these people, and it really is pretty special."

Today, more than 170 alumni will gather at Hill Auditorium in Ann Arbor -- the site of each chorale's final concert each summer -- for their final reunion concert. It is being conducted by a former director, Robert Pratt, who worked with the chorale from 1964-1973.

The concert marks the 50th anniversary of the first trip.

``It brings back the whole chorale experience and very rarely can a person take another glimpse at something so special," said Mark Grueneberg, who grew up in Jackson and traveled to northern Europe and the Soviet Union in the 1969 chorale. ``It's kind of a deja vu times eight or 10. It's more than just a little bit of a deja vu."

Intriguing experience

When Dr. Jim Wilkins attended the first chorale trip in 1958, as well as the second in 1959, he said he was intrigued by the people he met in Europe. The experience instilled in him a love of traveling.

``The traveling has become a huge part of my life, and I'm sure that's the origin of it," said Wilkins, 66, of Napoleon.

Just this year he and his family went to Vietnam, Cambodia and Thailand. Last year, they went to Egypt and Turkey.

Visiting Germany was an enlightening experience for Wilkins, especially because it was not long after World War II. He visited both east and west Berlin.

``There was a dramatic difference between the postwar building in east Berlin and west Berlin," he said. ``People dressed with much more color in the west and things were very drab in the east. Things looked very institutional in the east -- a lot of high-rise apartments and very little ornamentation. People didn't smile as much."

For him, the reunions offer a chance to catch up with old friends, as well as a chance to do what he loves -- sing.

“I went almost 30 years without singing,” he said. “I’m back singing.”

Flipping through scrapbooks filled with pictures, postcards and tokens recently, Melinda Hill Long became filled with nostalgia.

She has a purple crocheted mini skirt from South America, as well as a red plaid poncho that was all the rage on the continent in 1968.

“I haven’t looked at this for a long time,” said Long, 58 of Summit Township, as she told stories of delicious black beans and rice in Brazil as well as communists taking over while they were in Peru. The group was actually stopped by the military while en route to a concert and told they could not go any further because they could be in danger.

Long is hoping to reconnect with some of the families she stayed with in South America.

“I’ve lost contact with all of the families,” she said. “I saw these pictures (of them) and I just started to cry.”

At this year’s reunion, Long plans to meet up with an old high school friend she hasn’t seen in 40 years.

“It’s just so much fun to go back, and it’s almost like you don’t see the people as the age of what they are now,” she said. “You still think of yourself as being a high school student and just getting home from tour.”

It was July 1969 and man had just landed on the moon -- an American man. And Mark Grueneberg, an 18-year-old Parkside High School graduate, was in the former Soviet Union.

“I remember how proud I was to be an American as I glanced at the Soviet newspapers that had the picture on the front of the paper, the picture of the astronauts landing on the moon,” said Grueneberg, 57, who now lives in St. Johns.

The group of 70 students that toured northern Europe that summer even sang “Oh Freedom” as they crossed through Checkpoint Charlie -- the crossing point to access east and west Berlin through the Berlin Wall.

“The guards at checkpoint were very, very friendly and very accommodating, and remembered the group that came through two years before and had their brochure in their drawer. It was fine,” he said of traveling during the Cold War.

“(The Russians) loved hearing us sing. We were a novelty I’m sure to them as a Russian group

would be to us."

DuAnne Huntoon Sonneville was the first student selected from Parkside High School to travel with the chorale -- but the second person selected from her family.

"I was so excited," Sonneville said. "My sister picked me up from school that afternoon, and on the way home I told her and she literally almost drove off the road."

Her sister, Gail Huntoon Roberts, had one thing to say to Sonneville: "You don't know what that means yet -- you will."

Sonneville, now 59 and living in Orchard Lake, said the trip was a life changing experience.

"If nothing else it gave you self confidence (and) self assurance," she said. "And that translates for your entire life."

Annette Forbes Tuckey couldn't help but feel homesick on her chorale trip to South America in 1960 -- but just when she thought she couldn't take it anymore, she said she always turned to the music.

"The music was the thing that was so worth it, it was beautiful," said Tuckey, 65 of Blackman Township. "I never sang with a group again that I enjoyed more than Michigan Chorale. No matter what group I sang with I always compared it to them because they were so professional and so wonderful."

Tuckey's health will keep her from performing in the reunion concert this year. About a year ago, she had to go on oxygen for rheumatoid arthritis in her lungs.

"I'm still very upset about it. I am going to the concert, and I look forward to seeing all my friends again," she said. "I probably will go up on stage with my oxygen to sing, as long as I have oxygen I can still sing, thank God, I can still sing."

Alumni not performing in the concert are invited to come up during the final four songs that every chorale sang on their tours.

One of those songs -- "Onward Ye Peoples" by Jan Sibelius -- brings tears to the eyes of all chorale alumni, Sonneville and Roberts said.

"You'll stand there, male (or) female, the youngest to the oldest of the group, we are all going to have tears in our eyes," Sonneville said. "Because it just brings back all of the memories of the whole experience."

"It was the last ultimate number," said Roberts in response. "And it does it every time."

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