Harmony of the Gorge singers perform throughout the region, from nursing homes to churches, parades, picnics and more. PHOTO COURTESY OF HARMONY OF THE GORGE

SWEET HARMONY

A chorus of women lifts spirits through song

By Drew Myron

It started simply. In the 1980s, a group of women got together to sing.

They met each week, honing four-part harmonies and learning new songs. They donned matching shirts and performed at community events. As they held each note, something longer than a song took hold: friendship.

"We get to be a family. We care about each other," says Kathy Franks, a retired Hood River Valley teacher who has sung with Harmony of the Gorge chorus for 25 years. "There's something about singing and music that's from your soul. You feel better. It gives you a lift."

This year, Harmony of the Gorge celebrates 40 years of making music. Throughout the decades, singers have seasoned and aged, celebrated personal gains, and survived sickness, loss and a global pandemic.

Singers come from all over the Columbia Gorge, many driving more than an hour for weekly rehearsals. Members hail from both sides of the Columbia River: Stevenson, North Bonneville, Carson, Lyle, Appleton, White Salmon, Dallesport, Klickitat, Hood River, The Dalles, Parkdale and Odell.

Even a long drive to practice is worth the effort, says Rhonda Smith of Appleton.

"I can be having a bad day at work, then get in the car and come here and sing for two hours, and I'm happy," she says.

That happiness is scientific fact. Decades of research has shown singing releases endorphins that raise energy levels and boost moods. Because singing involves deep breathing and the controlled use of muscles, it can be beneficial for lung conditions, and help improve speech and neurological conditions.

Music is one of the only activities that stimulates and activates the entire brain, according to researchers at Johns Hopkins School of Medicine.

"Music is structural, mathematical and architectural," researchers note. "It's based on relationships between one note and the next. You may not be aware of it, but your brain has to do a lot of computing to make sense of it."

Harmony of the Gorge is a women's a cappella chorus and four-part harmony—a complex form of singing not easily mastered. At any moment, the music consists of four voices each singing one note, as voices produce four-note chords.

When a harmony is successful, two or more vocal parts come together in an arrangement that adds feeling, depth and texture to a song.

Harmony of the Gorge performs with no accompaniment and without sheet music, demanding that all songs and parts are thoroughly memorized.

The group meets every Tuesday night in Hood River for a two-hour rehearsal. Led by director Judy Galloway, the singers share an evening of musical exercises as they challenge their voices and stretch their abilities.

"In four-part harmony, the quality of the singing is exceptional," Judy says. "The notes have to be very accurate."

The group sings at community events and venues throughout the Gorge, from nursing homes to local festivals, holiday celebrations to private events. In February, the group delivers singing Valentines. In summer, they often sing in parades.

Harmony of the Gorge is a chapter of Sweet Adelines International, a worldwide organization of 21,000 singers. Formed in 1945, Sweet Adelines is one of the world's largest women's singing organizations. Members span five continents, ranging from 9 to 90 years old. The group holds competitions, conferences and opportunities for singers to learn and grow.

At its peak, Harmony of the Gorge chorus had more than 30 singers. Today, the group numbers 12 to 15. Time, combined with pandemic restrictions that disrupted rehearsals and routines, have taken a toll.

The group is aging, says Dotty Nelson of Parkdale. A founding member, she was instrumental in launching the chorus more than 40 years ago.

ABOVE: Rhonda Smith, left, and Frances Heller sing during a practice session.

RIGHT: Practice makes perfect for Marla St John, left, and Linda Green. PHOTOS BY DREW MYRON

"When I joined, everyone was my age," she says. "And now everyone is still my age. We need new members."

The youngest member, Anna Bates, is 61. She joined the group in 2022.

"It's great to find a group of women who are so kind and so supportive of each other," Anna says.

A recently retired electrician, she enjoys running and other physical activities.

"I've found community with women in sports, but this is different," she says, smiling as she chokes back tears.

Working to attract new, younger singers, the group has added more contemporary music to its repertoire. The singers actively seek to perform at community events and venues that draw a young to middle-aged crowd.

Potential members are encouraged to visit a Tuesday session. No formal audition is required. New members can expect a warm welcome, Judy says, along with laughter, camaraderie and good music.

"We love to sing together, and we'd love to have new singers," she says. "We believe that everyone can sing. We're just a group of women who *need* to sing!" ■

For more information, visit the Harmony of the Gorge website at harmonyofthegorge.weebly.com or the group's YouTube channel at www.youtube.com/@harmonyofthegorge; or call Judy Galloway, director, at 541-490-2481.