

The impact of a “typical” chapter

What would your community leaders say about your chapter, if you asked? To the Sault Ste. Marie, Ont. chapter, receiving the community’s highest honor came second to learning how strongly the community felt about their “typical” local contributions

Do you fully appreciate the impact that your singing can have on others? Members of the **Sault Ste. Marie, Ont. Chapter** (PIO) had almost no idea until recently, when we were asked to solicit comments from the community ahead of receiving the City’s Medal of Merit award. Your chapter may have a lot of grateful fans like we do and not even know it.

The Medal of Merit is the municipality’s highest civic award, presented annually to a person or group that “over a period of years has made an outstanding contribution to the community.” Our chapter was

among 14 nominees this year, and we were asked to solicit letters of support, which are critical in the judges’ decision.

We were amazed to find how many organizations were thrilled to submit letters on our behalf. We collected 27 of them, including five from the Michigan side—the largest submission seen in recent years and a testimony to the impact the chorus has had. (Read excerpts from the letters on pages 12-13. Your chapter may have similar fans in your community!) We eventually shared the spotlight with a man who has locally organized and coached youth soccer for almost 50 years.

We’ve been both humbled and thrilled to see how our singing has touched many lives in ways that we didn’t fully appreciate. That may be the best part of being given the award. It’s a “shot in the arm,” motivating us to improve our singing and presentation and to approach each appearance with renewed

“Honey, rehearsal is tonight—where’s my passport?” The 51 members of the Sault Ste. Marie, Ont. Chapter (pronounced “Sue Saint Marie”) include 44 active singers, seven of whom cross the St. Mary’s River every week from Michigan to attend rehearsals on the Ontario side. Increased border security requires proper documentation—as well as always bringing their sheet music to prove their border crossing “story” to the border guards. Canadian members require the same for frequent Michigan performances.



BARBARA J. GOUGH, SAULT STE. MARIE, ONTARIO

What great things did the Sault Ste. Marie chapter do to receive its community's highest honor? In one sense, nothing special—generally, the activities most barbershop chapters are involved in. But “nothing special” certainly isn't how community leaders saw it!



energy. There are probably many small chapters in our Society that “fly under the radar” as we do. We don't go to the Pioneer District competition often, but we keep very busy locally—and for us, “locally” may mean “international,” but that is just an interesting consequence of our border town location.

Several extensive quotations from those letters are shown on pages 12-13. They largely hit on these themes, illustrated by quotes from the letters:

- **Effect on an audience:** “When they closed the concert with ‘We'll Meet Again,’ I don't think there was a dry eye in the house.”
- **Help to other groups:** “I'm Music Director at our church, and they have worked with our ministers and me to fit their music into meaningful worship for our congregation for over ten years.”
- **Dedication to singing:** “No matter what the weather (and it could be very cold and windy) they were happy to perform at the Open-

ing Ceremonies of our annual Bon Soo Winter Carnival.”

- **Donations to local charity:** “To date, the Northland Chorus has donated in excess of \$50,000 to the Sault Area Hospital Foundation to aid various programs and provide support materials and equipment.”
- **Efforts to encourage singers and singing:** “At intermission, the chorus led us in an old-fashioned sing-along, which the audience embraced.”
- **Role as community ambassadors:** “Having heard the chorus in the past, I could not think of anyone more suitable to give a lasting impression of our community to those who attended the closing Liturgical Celebration of our Diocesan Convention.”

50 years of service to Sault Ste. Marie

Our chapter is celebrating the 50th anniversary of becoming chartered this year. Although we no longer have any founding members in the group, we do have four guys who have been members for 35 years or longer and thus wear our Golden Oldies Badge. On the other hand, we have six young men who hadn't even been born when the Oldies joined up. We're proud of what that says about the broad appeal of our music. Chapter President Folgo Della Vedova wrote a message in the program for our annual show this past April which said, in part, “It has been 50 joyous years of sharing our music with others at life's most significant events... 50 years of brotherhood, making wonderful music together with our friends.”

Our director, Bob Shami, is very expressive and animated, and even though the audience is seeing his backside most of the time, they understand how



Bernie Arbic
Member,
Sault Ste.
Marie chapter
b-c-carbic@
sbcglobal.net



he's working us. After a church appearance a few years ago, a 90-year-old fellow told Bob, "Well you sure can suck the music outta them boys!"

The medal presentation ceremony

What an evening! The entire chapter attended an award dinner hosted by the city council on May 7, 2011. We even got to sing half a dozen songs—perhaps the highlight was when we serenaded Sault Ste. Marie Mayor Debbie Amaroso with "Only You," decked out in our finest show apparel, and with two of our "hair-challenged" men paying her special attention on bended knee. As a bonus, since some in the audience had never heard us before, we hope we gained some prospective customers for our annual show in the bargain.

Sharon Graham, member of the Medal of Merit



PHOTOS THIS PAGE: BARBARA J. GOUGH, SAULT STE. MARIE, ONTARIO

Shortly after this shot of chorus members singing "Only You" to Mayor Debbie Amaroso, the crowd roared as she rubbed the bald heads of both "suits"—and the photographer was laughing too hard to frame the shot. In addition to performances by the chorus, members were called up individually to receive certificates and lapel pins in a touching ceremony. Many other community leaders were on hand, including local Member of Provincial Parliament for

Sault Ste. Marie, David Oraziotti (with Chapter President Folgo Della Vedova and Chorus Director Bob Shami), who presented a plaque from the Province of Ontario in recognition of the chapter's 2010 Medal of Merit.

Selection Committee, said of the chapter:

"We were so impressed by the vast array of venues for their performances. They've healed, touched and shared their wide range of music at weddings,

Echoes of your chapter? Excerpts from letters encouraging the Sault Ste. Marie Chapter's selection for the 2010 Medal of Merit

These letters written on behalf of the Sault Ste. Marie Chapter demonstrate how barbershoppers can affect a community through their activities. Chorus members were amazed at how eager members of the community were to write letters of recommendation on their behalf. They were almost left speechless once they got the letters back and realized what kind of effect they had been having. What would members of your community say if asked to speak up on your behalf?

We believe the chorus would be an excellent recipient for this award as their performances bring a sense of belonging to their audience. Many a trip down memory lane has been taken by our senior friends while being entertained by the Northland Barbershop Chorus ... every show, every group, no matter the numbers, is made to feel special. Music is a universal language and these gentlemen bring all our senior friends together heart and soul. When you hear them, perhaps at a nursing home, and you see how their music brings smiles to old, worn, tired faces and twinkles to otherwise sad, lonely eyes you know you

have participated in something very special.

— Catherine B. Johnson, Supervisor Senior's Services, City of Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario

Over the years, the Northland Barbershop Chorus has donated more than \$50,000 to the Sault Area Hospital's Speech and Language Pathology Department. I believe that a history of how this came about may shed some light on the importance this group has played in the lives of many in our community. It began in 1995 when I was working in the department as Speech Language Pathologist. I had a patient who had suffered a brain

stem stroke and could only move his eyes. He did not have the necessary funds to purchase an eye-gaze board—a clear fibreglass board which would allow him to communicate. The price of this augmentative device was \$30.

Through my travels I had heard of Barbershop groups and their motto: "We sing that they shall speak." I looked up the local Barbershop group in the phone book and contacted Bob Shami, the music director of the chorus. I explained the situation and within days the group had donated \$100 and told us to buy three eye-gaze boards! What seemed like a small act

Director's first arrangement becomes chapter's timely gift for fallen soldier's family

The first full song ever arranged by Northland Chorus Director Bob Shami became the vehicle for one of the chapter's most moving performances. Bob had been deeply touched by "Mansions of the Lord," which was sung by the West Point Cadet Glee Club over the closing credits of the 2001 Mel Gibson movie *We Were Soldiers*. He found an existing arrangement by John Nicholas but wanted to go for something different. With help from John, Joe Liles, and Joe Johnson, he came up with an arrangement that matched his vision for the piece. He knew he wanted the chapter to learn it, yet was unsure they would ever perform it in public.

Tragically, soon after the chorus had learned the song, a young soldier from Sault Ste. Marie, Michigan, Army Specialist Brandon Steffey, was killed by a roadside bomb in Afghanistan. One of our members knew his family, and mentioned the song to them. They honored us with a request to perform it at the funeral, which was to take place with full military honors.

The two-and-a-half hour service was spellbinding for the reverence, polish, and class with which the military paid their respects to one of their own. The 2,000 attendees ended up being the chorus's largest-ever audience. In a setting like that, chapter members were glad the high standards behind Bob's motto: "Perfection is the goal...Excellence will be tolerated." The silence after the last chord drifted away was extremely moving. Now, whenever members sing "Mansions of the Lord" at a chapter meeting or for a group, it is with special reverence.

Noted barbershop arrangers including Jim Clancy, Joe Johnson and Joe Liles have praised the arrangement, which Bob is happy to share. For details, e-mail bshami@shaw.ca.



Northland
Barbershop Chorus
SAULT STE. MARIE

Using both the U.S. and Canadian national colors, the chapter's logo represents its two-nation status. The singer's moustache is the iconic International Bridge, which connects the twin cities in Michigan and Ontario, both named Sault Ste. Marie. His barber pole hat is made up of four bars (for the four harmony parts) and he sings the "O" vowel that is the first sound in both national anthems.

funerals, birthdays and anniversaries—in schools and churches, in retirement homes and hospitals, at ice cream socials and pageants, at coaching clinics and carnivals. Their range of music, from early hymns and popular music of 100 years ago to more recent hits by Elton John and The Beach Boys, has been enjoyed by thousands of people during the past 50 years."

Accepting the award, Chapter President Folgo

Della Vedova spoke for all when he said: "We will cherish our beautiful Medal of Merit and wear our pins with pride and honour. It is you, our valued community brothers and sisters, who encourage us and strengthen us individually and collectively to continue to do what we love best, to sing in tight barbershop harmony." ■

of kindness provided the only means of communication to a man who had been suffering in silence.

—Alana MacIntyre, Speech Language Pathologist

As co-founder of the Algoma Traditional Music and Dance Group — a non-profit group dedicated to the preservation of traditional music, dance and art in inter-generational settings — I keep seeing the benefits of music in the lives of people. It builds community, friendships, and creates joy and a sense of well-being. It ripples out and affects others in a positive manner. Our group shares Northland's philosophy of communal singing for the joy of it, and has been generously supported by them in the last few years through scholarship money donated during our annual summer camp. They requested that the scholarship money be given to individuals who have a passion for singing, and who might be encouraged to keep on singing throughout their lives. There is no doubt

that singing empowers people of all ages, builds confidence, and reaches the hearts of listeners.

—Julie Schryer, Administrator, The Algoma Traditional Music and Dance Group

On November 7-9, 2008 the Northland Barbershop Chorus volunteered to travel to Kincardine — a nine-hour bus trip — to put on a benefit show for our Legion branch at no cost to us. The show was called A World War II Revue and was performed in our local United Church, which has one of the largest seating capacities in town. As can be seen by the date of the event, it was geared to a Remembrance Day theme that was very appropriate and in the true light of what the Legion stands for. To say that their performance was outstanding is a gross understatement. The venue was filled to capacity. The show was about two and one half hours in length, and one could hear a pin drop throughout it. This show realized a profit of over \$10,000 for our

branch, which was utilized to help keep our doors open and thus provide support to our local community.

—Robert (Red) Larsen, President, MacDonald Branch #183, Royal Canadian Legion

This group of dedicated individuals, led by the visionary Bob Shami, constantly supports the artistic endeavours of other local arts groups, whether, for example, by contributing quartet singers for Sault Theatre Workshop productions, singing as a chorus in four local schools on Music Monday, or by providing financial assistance in the form of annual music scholarships. As an educator, I applaud their efforts to instill in all people—especially youth—the joy of vocal music. One cannot overestimate the value of their efforts as teachers, mentors, entertainers and fund-raisers spreading the thrill of a capella singing while entertaining.

—Barbara Gallagher, Music Director, St. Basil Secondary School