

It Starts with a Dream!

William Bennett

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“I have a dream. . .”

—Martin Luther King Jr.

“There was a dream that was Rome. It shall be realized.”

—Maximus (from the movie, *Gladiator*)

I was hired as the choir director at Cane Bay High School in the spring of 2008. As you might imagine, I was incredibly excited about the opportunity to open a new school! Generally, it takes three to five years to build a choral program. I set out to do it in two! I figured that since we were starting from scratch, there wouldn't be the usual transition from Mr. or Ms. So-in-So did it this way. I was wrong, very wrong!

One summer night about a month before school started, I drove out to the school. The campus was pitch black since the security lights hadn't been fully installed, and a bright moon lit the grounds of the campus. It was a warm, foggy summer night, and I was the only person on campus. Aside from the occasional car passing, it was almost silent and very still. I drove to the outside of the choir room where there is a window into that room. I stood looking into the room, and I dreamed.

I imagined the students that would come through that

door in the coming months and years. I thought about the parents I would have the privilege of working with and the performances the students and I would create together.

I dreamed about the colleagues who would become a support system for me (and I for them) when we needed each other most. I dreamed about the legacy we would leave for others to follow. I dreamed about what those choir members might believe in and hoped that they would carry on the traditions that we laid down for them.

I dreamed big—about performing music of the finest quality, about having fun performing together and building a community. I dreamed about performing at State, Regional, and National Conferences, about making a name for ourselves in our state and across the country, about building something that our students would be proud of, years down the road, about inspiring our students to go further than they ever thought they could imagine to see if we could create music that would move us to tears and change us as humans.

As I stood there dreaming, my mind racing through the possibilities, I began to cry at the overwhelming emotion of the moment. To this day, the memory of that moment makes me emotional. It was an incredible moment of excitement, fear, anxiety, wonder, joy, happiness, enthusiasm, self-doubt, bravado, and love all wrapped up into one.

This is where our choral program started. It was a dream, a vision, a goal. At that time, I had no idea just how difficult achieving this dream would be. I couldn't know, and, to

be honest, that there were many times when I thought the dream would never be a reality. There were many times when I wanted to quit, give-up, change jobs for greener pastures.

There were many times when I thought, in private moments, that the dream could never become a reality because of hurdles, such as unmotivated students, disengaged parents, lack of administrative support, lack of resources, my own personal shortcomings, etc. The dream was like the flame of a candle, and there were many times when that candle was almost blown out.

On the first day of school, with our first rehearsal of what would become the Cobra Chorale, I shared my dream of what we could become. I told the singers how we wanted to build a choral tradition that would be mentioned in the same breath as the best choirs around our state and the country. I spoke about this dream as if it were a predetermined reality. Not “if we work really hard, we might be able to do this,” but rather “if we work really hard, we *will* be able to do this.” I laid out this vision to a group of forty-three ninth- and tenth-grade students who did not see the same thing that I saw!

Most of our freshmen singers had had a teacher their sixth-grade year whose idea of choir was to sing along with the latest rap or hip hop songs. That approach was replaced the next year with a trumpet player/teacher who had never taught chorus. This teacher did the best he could, but he, in my opinion, lacked the knowledge and skills to truly prepare these students to continue singing. The sophomores were not much better. They were accustomed to singing mostly pop and show tunes and learning everything by listening to accompaniment CDs and picking out the individual parts as best they could.

Then, these same singers had one year at nearby Stratford High School with a tremendously gifted and talented director who taught students solfège, sang quality repertoire, made them believe in the value of music literacy, and gave them a great foundation. They came to me, then, their fourth choir director in four years!

Needless to say, there were trust issues. They didn't believe in my “stupid dream.” One day in rehearsal, I stopped the choir and said, “You aren't doing the things I am asking you to do in the music. We keep making the same mistakes over and over, and they are easy things to fix, guys! Do you not trust the fact that I know what I am talking about? What's going on?” One brave girl spoke up and said, “Well,

you aren't going to be here next year, so why does it matter?”

I stopped again and said, “Everyone look at me. I am going to be here next year and the year after that and the year after that. I'm not going anywhere! My dream for the choir is to become one of the best in the state and the country. That's not going to happen overnight. What we are doing right now is a part of that process, and we need to trust each other if we are going to get there.” That was a major turning point in the development of the choir.

I encourage all of you choir directors to take time this semester to dream big! Then, share your dreams with your choirs! Involve them in the process. Sit down with them and have dreaming sessions about performances that they would like to put together. You don't have to do everything they suggest, just realize that they will not give their all to everything you put in front of them; however, give them ownership of ideas and build trust. I believe it's the only way you can really build a firm foundation for growth. This isn't my choir or their choir. It's our choir, and we have to build it together.

Talking about our dreams with our students helps them understand that we are invested in their success! We are there to help them achieve great things if they are willing to go after those things together. It also models a successful and valuable life skill for them.

Encourage your students to dream about their futures and work persistently toward their personal life goals. Once everyone has a common goal and a dream, then you are well on your way to building a great choral program.

One way to dream and motivate yourself is by attending conferences! They expose all of us to the highest level of the choral art, inspire us to continue to grow and to learn, and help us gain those skills through a variety of interest sessions. We hope to see you all there!

Dream on! ■