

The High Hopes choir gives a voice to its 90+ members, all of whom are people experiencing homelessness. In this article Glenn Alexander, Managing Coordinator of High Hopes Choir outlines of how music has benefitted choir members, while touching on some of the Choir's major achievements.

HEAR MY VOICE: THE ROLE OF THE HIGH HOPES CHOIR IN TACKLING SOCIAL EXCLUSION



By **Glenn Alexander**, Managing Coordinator, High Hopes Choir

Having worked in the field of homelessness for over 15 years and for many years using skills that I acquired to create a connection with individuals, I was always looking for tools or resources that would help homeless individuals to engage with myself, other workers, and organisations. Whether it was social clubs, activities, residents' meetings or one to one learning, I was always on the lookout for something that would spark this engagement. However, either through professional relations or organisational policies and procedures, it always felt orchestrated or overly formal, while naturally the buy-in from individuals will always be tinged with a certain level of apprehension or fear of opening themselves up.

When we engage with individuals affected by homelessness and we create a professional working relationship (and for me it is important to remember as well as to convey to a vulnerable person) you are asking to borrow something from them for a short while. You are asking that for a short time you borrow their voice and speak on their behalf; you borrow their conscience for decision making, letting them know what you think is good or bad for them to be involved in and, most importantly, you borrow their trust to share how they feel about past, present, or future.

You are asking all of these things with a view to building that person up with self-esteem, self-worth, and self-confidence.

You are getting them to a point where you can give back everything you have borrowed from them because they can now manage to hold those pieces themselves and move forward in their lives.

However, in my experience it is often the times that when we are holding these pieces, that far too often the critical engagement breaks down due to factors such as re-employment, re-housing, funding, addiction, poor mental health, or organisational restructuring. A person gets left again having loaned their voice, trust and conscience

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to a worker or professional, only for them to be asked by someone new in the next engagement tool or professional relationship to once again give something of themselves. They become withdrawn to a point of isolating themselves from other individuals, professionals, and ultimately society.

Here for me is where the formation of The High Hopes Choir became such an important element in tackling isolation; creating an engagement resource for individuals that did not require me to ask anything from members except to use their voice in a literal sense.

Our invitation was “We have a space, can you speak? You have a voice, do you want to use it?”

The High Hopes Choir is the culmination of Ireland's first homeless choir, with more than 90 homeless adults, all dealing with Ireland's homeless crisis, reaching beyond their stars, engaging with the public, empowering themselves with self-confidence, and, of course, entertaining. Moreover, the choir is completely run by the members with the only professional being a Musical Director.

In the last few years, the choirs have performed at numerous high-profile events around the country and beyond. Performing in the European Parliament, playing for the President in Áras an Uachtaráin, singing the National Anthem for the Wales v Ireland game in the Aviva Stadium, headlining the Olympia Theatre in Dublin and their highlight, performing for Pope Francis in Croke Park, which reverberated around Europe.

There is something untouchable about music. There is something about music that defies all explanation. J.K. Rowling perhaps put it best, when she wrote this of Dumbledore, the headmaster of Hogwarts: "Ah, music," he said, wiping his eyes, "A magic far beyond all we do here."

Singing in a choir can lead to a sense of achievement, an increase in self-esteem, increased confidence, self-discipline, and provide a means of self-expression. Participating in The High Hopes Choir promotes friendship with like-minded people, it builds self-confidence,

social skills, social networking, a sense of belonging, teamwork, responsibility, commitment, mutual support, bonding to meet group goals, most importantly it provides an outlet for relaxation.

The positive effects of engagement with music for this choir on personal and social development will only occur if, overall, it is an enjoyable and rewarding experience. The quality of the teaching, the extent to which the members perceive that they are successful, and whether it is a positive experience in the long-term will all contribute to the feeling of personal or social benefit.

The High Hopes Choir has truly touched hearts. Music has the power to give a voice to those whose voices are not often listened to. Every song tells a story, and every single member of the High Hopes Choir has a story to tell – a story that may contain unfathomable loneliness, but it also contains courage and faith and strength and honour. It is also a story that conveys remarkable hope.

Exceptional, amazing, and inspiring, every time the High Hopes Choir sing, the people who make it up, remind us of how far they have come – and in doing so, they remind us of how far we can all go. Every time they sing, they subtly convey a fabulous message - that we can get knocked down, but we do not have to stay down, that we can fall but we can also rise.

They also show us something that we have learned to be true in our own experience in our own lives. We see how music allows people to come together to create. It injects people with confidence. It calls on people to express themselves. It begs them to flourish.

Music celebrates. It communicates. It speaks when words are not enough; it brings us all together.



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