

Alchemy Chorus hits right note

Alchemy Chorus, Canberra's first dementia-inclusive community choir, brings together people with dementia, their carers and volunteer musicians and singers for rehearsals and concerts. The choir's founder and conductor, **Brian Triglone**, reflects on their successes and challenges over the past three years

I started Alchemy Chorus in October 2016, based on the Giving Voice Chorus in Minnesota, in the US.

When we began we had about 50 members. We now have over 100 members with an average weekly attendance approaching 85. So by attendances at least, I guess we can claim success.

We have three roughly equal groups in the choir: those with dementia, their partner/carer/friend, and volunteers who provide all the logistical support and add some vocal strength. This structure lessens the 'curiosity effect' which might otherwise attach to the choir and the presence of some stronger voices in the volunteers also encourages the more timid, anxious members with dementia to 'sing out' – and that's where the benefits lie. Whether that is music therapy, simply a release of endorphins or something else, people from all three groups seem to leave on a high.

What we've learnt

Performances are a highlight for all

Since we started, we've held two concerts each year. All have been incredibly successful with an overwhelming audience response. Performance is an important part of our model for several reasons:

- It brings purpose to our weekly two-hour practices and lifts them from just being a sing-a-long session. This adds dignity, normality and validation to what we're doing and develops a great sense of pride when we've performed well. One of our soloists said recently that he feels proud and worthwhile after he's performed and his wife admits to being equally



Alchemy Chorus Canberra now has over 100 members with an average weekly attendance of almost 85 people including those living with dementia, partners, carers, friends and volunteers.

Photo: Hilary Wardhaugh

proud, tinged with some sadness, that for those three minutes or so, she sees again the husband she remembers from earlier times.

- It showcases the choir, which helps with recruitment and also demonstrates really strongly that people living with dementia are still valuable members of our society with a contribution to make. Our soloists are almost always people with dementia.

We are certainly not performance-driven to the point where we lose sight of the benefits of a good old sing. We don't learn new songs just for a concert, but rather draw on songs that we all know well from our weekly repertoire. The success of our concerts is a result more of what songs we sing and how enthusiastically we sing them, than the choral quality. So, I need to draw on my years as a performer and conductor to present a program to which everyone in the choir can contribute and which also has audience impact.

We usually begin with an

upbeat number such as *There's No Business Like Show Business* followed by, for example, *Those Magnificent Men in Their Flying Machines*, *Hallelujah* or *The Rose*. One of our soloists does a beautiful rendition of *Somewhere (A Place For Us)* and our men love to perform the *Gendarmes' Duet*, which always brings the house down.

The therapeutic effects vary

In a recent in-house survey reviewing the choir's operation, 95% of carers reported that after practice there were positive changes in their partner's mood, communication and alertness. For some, these can last until the next practice. For those further along the path, the results suggest that the changes are quite short-lived – by some reports, lasting no longer than the walk back to the car.

I was intrigued to hear the daughter of one of our members with quite advanced dementia report her mother saying on the way home from practice that she knew she'd just had a wonderful time but

couldn't remember where. So, in her case at least, the sense of pleasure lasted longer than her memory of the event itself. Another lady had lost the ability to use cutlery, but when they stopped for lunch at a restaurant after each practice, she temporarily regained that ability.

There's lots of humour and we regularly ask couples to tell us their potted life stories which are always interesting and often surprising. Importantly, it is also a way of validating and respecting each person as an individual.

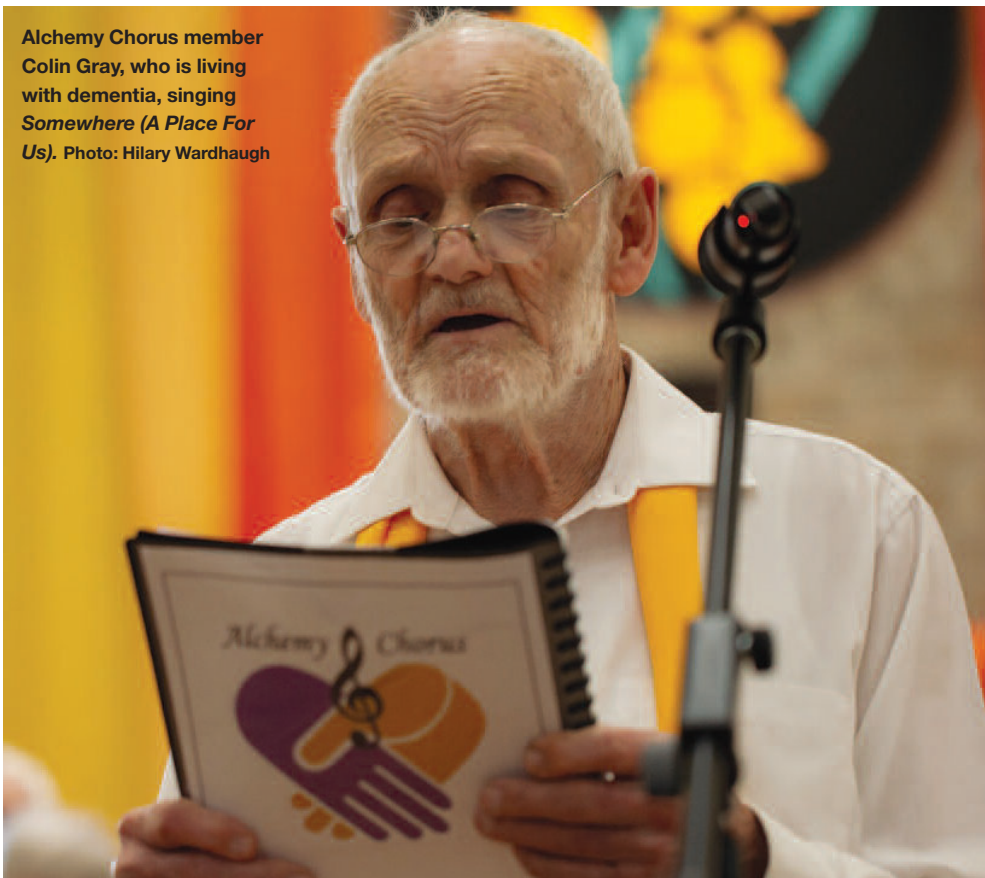
The value of the choir to carers/partners and volunteers

The real surprise that has emerged over our three years' of operation is the strong feedback we receive from the partners. In the survey, 99% rated their enjoyment level at practices and performances at five (the highest). One partner commented that she doesn't know how she would have coped had she not discovered the choir.

Another has described coming to practice each week as "a glorious ordinariness" where he and his wife could simply immerse themselves in a singing environment with absolutely no pressure on them. Just as importantly, it's a time when everyone, but particularly carers, can share their feelings, concerns and frustrations with others in the same boat without feeling any embarrassment.

In the early stages, it seems that both the carer and the person with dementia really enjoy attending, but as the dementia progresses, and as might be expected, the choir seems to become slightly more important to the carer than to the person with dementia.

Alchemy Chorus member Colin Gray, who is living with dementia, singing *Somewhere (A Place For Us)*. Photo: Hilary Wardhaugh



Nevertheless, the survey shows that even those with more advanced dementia still report a high level of enjoyment. This assessment was sometimes made by the carer, but none rated below three on a scale of five and one recorded a 10++!

The other surprise is that at least six carers have remained with the choir as volunteers after their loved one passed away. They are invaluable for providing feedback and

suggestions, but I also believe this speaks to the impact that the choir has had on their lives.

Volunteers, too, report immense pleasure and satisfaction from being a part of the inclusive 'Alchemy blend'. At our final practice for 2019, one of the carers described the volunteers as the "body and soul of the choir" and they certainly are a vital component of this three-tiered model which we find so successful.

Challenges

Two significant challenges have emerged for the choir. The first relates to maintaining Alchemy's aim and structure. As much as we would like to include anyone with dementia, we feel that it is important to stay with a model that caters for those couples who are at risk of becoming socially isolated and can gain from participating in a genuine choir including public performance. Many of those in the early

stages of dementia will be still coming to grips with their diagnosis and so an environment which is as close to normal as possible is much less confronting and more likely to help them feel included. This applies equally to the carers.

So we have decided to restate our original aims and to target those who are in the early to moderate stages of dementia and who can be accompanied by a relative or friend, to provide a balance against those members who are entering the later stages of dementia. We will of course, always apply compassion and some flexibility in the application of this broad policy and no-one would ever be asked to leave because they have moved to an advanced stage of dementia.

Our second challenge is to encourage others around Australia to start their own Alchemy Chorus. There are at least 100 people here in Canberra who will attest to the fact that there are few more satisfying experiences.

Because we are wholly voluntary, we are completely self-funded by weekly payments of \$5. We have never sought or received any financial assistance apart from personal donations. In fact we recently donated \$3000 to Dementia Australia from our concert proceeds. We are, however, looking into acquiring funding that will enable us to offer start-up grants to others wishing to



Alchemy Chorus in concert in May 2018 at Canberra's Weston Creek Uniting Church, with soloist and proud Scot George Dobbin (now deceased). Photo: Brendon Kelson

form their own Alchemy Chorus.

In the meantime, if you feel that you might like to start an Alchemy Chorus in your area or know someone who might, or would simply like to chat about what we're doing, please give me a call on 0402 095 592 or email me at briantrig@iinet.net.au.

'Life-changing'

In conclusion, let me pass on two comments: the first is from the author Margaret Atwood in a recent interview about her husband who has dementia. She said that she had resolved that he would always accompany her on her travels and that she would not let him be shuffled off to the sidelines and treated as a non-person. That nicely encapsulates the aims of Alchemy Chorus.

The second came at the end of our final practice for 2019, when one member with a recent diagnosis simply said to me: "I just want you to know that this choir has changed my life".

That's what makes it all so worthwhile and rewarding. ■

For more information about Alchemy Chorus and upcoming concert performances, visit www.alchemychorus.com.



■ Brian Triglone OAM is the founder and conductor of Alchemy Chorus Canberra. He has a long involvement in community choirs in Canberra including 15 years as founding conductor of The Gospel Folk. Prior to that, he was Assistant Conductor of The Australian Rugby Choir. Brian was awarded the Medal of the Order of Australia (OAM) in 2017 for services to the choral community in the ACT