

The Positive Effects of Barbershop Harmony on a Successful High School Choral Program  
Sheryl Berlin, Choral Music Educator  
Gaithersburg High School  
Gaithersburg, MD  
[Sheryl\\_J\\_Berlin@mcpsmd.org](mailto:Sheryl_J_Berlin@mcpsmd.org)

My first quartet of high school boys was formed in May of 2006, after Bill Colosimo said to me, "If you can get four boys together who can sing, I'll coach them and they can go to Harmony College East in Salisbury in June." Having absolutely no idea what that really meant, I trusted Bill, and I asked the men in my Chamber Singers ensemble for "volunteers." That day, our first quartet, Six Foot Four, was born. And that year's Mid-Atlantic District Southern Division Contest was my formal introduction to (and immersion in) the barbershop art form, and I haven't looked back!

Since that introduction, so much has happened. Gaithersburg High School has gone from having one quartet in 2006, to two in 2007, and now, five in 2008, both boys' and girls'. Thanks to the generosity of the Mid-Atlantic District and the Harmony Foundation, I have attended Harmony University/Director's College in St. Joseph, Missouri, twice, and as a result of the Society's Director Certification Program, I am now a BHS Certified Director, one of only two individuals to receive this designation in the Mid Atlantic District in 2008. I am also proud to say that I am now one of the Assistant Directors of the Singing Capital Chorus, the performing ensemble of the DC Chapter of the Barbershop Harmony Society.

Barbershop music has influenced the choral program at Gaithersburg High School in so many positive ways. All of my students, not just my barbershoppers, have benefited from the inclusion of Barbershop music in our program. All students have been exposed to this unique art form, although not all students choose to participate in it, in addition to the various styles and genres of choral music that are "typically" sung in high school choral programs. The a cappella singing skills of the barbershoppers have improved so much that these students now serve as leaders and example setters within their larger choral ensembles. These young singers have learned to be more independent musicians. Not only have they grown as musicians, but they've grown as people as well, honing their leadership skills and becoming more self-confident with every performance. Many of my barbershop graduates continue to sing in a cappella ensembles and quartets at their colleges and universities, and some have even gone on to affiliate with a BHS chapter near their college and become members! And as I have watched my students gain a love for this art form, I, too, have formed a quartet of my own, with three of my barbershop moms!

Barbershop music in my choral program has not only improved the skills of all of my singers, but has made me a much better director and choral educator. The Barbershop Harmony Society's approach to proper and healthy vocal production completely aligns with the vocal pedagogy I teach. Through the courses I have taken and the skills that I have learned through the Director Certification program, I have been able to guide all of my student ensembles to improve the quality of their singing and performance, which has recently led to two of my choruses qualifying for the Maryland State Choral Festival for the last two years. Admittedly, the

inclusion of an extra-curricular barbershop program as part of the Gaithersburg High School choral offerings requires a major time commitment, both on the parts of the students involved as well as the music educator, but personal experience has shown that the paybacks of the invested time are ten-fold.

There has been tireless support, too, from the men in the Barbershop Harmony Society, as well as the women in Sweet Adelines, International. I have learned that all you have to do is ask, and help will be provided. In partnership with the DC Chapter, we have just had our Third Annual Fall A Cappella Festival, at which all of the Gaithersburg High School choral ensembles and barbershop quartets perform side by side with the Singing Capital Chorus. The GHS barbershop students have been invited to perform on numerous local chapter shows at such venues as Lisner Auditorium in Washington, DC, and the F. Scott Fitzgerald Theater in Rockville, MD. The Singing Capital Chorus has warmly included my students and their parents in chapter activities, and students periodically attend their chapter meetings. The Mid-Atlantic District has subsidized my students' tuition at Harmony College East for the last three summers, and has also subsidized some of my costs for Harmony University. In addition, the support of the Harmony Foundation has been invaluable in providing assistance to the young men and women who attend Harmony College East (and other similar festivals), as well as providing the scholarships that allowed me to attend Harmony University. The Society also holds divisional and district-wide youth adjudications, which offer students the opportunity to perform for a panel of judges, and afterward, participate in evaluations which help students to continue to improve their execution of the barbershop craft. The GHS barbershoppers have traveled to Richmond, Baltimore, Lancaster, PA, and New Jersey to participate in these adjudications.

My students and I are still learning, but I can't imagine being helped along by any better mentors than I've had the privilege of knowing through the Barbershop Harmony Society.