

Raising Their



Members of Voices of Our City Choir have built community through the power of making music.

Voices



Voices of Our City Choir aims to help those impacted by homelessness through music and community

BY JENNIFER IANNI PHOTOS BY PEGGY PEATTIE

Every Monday at 11 a.m., a group of San Diegans gathers in the church at St. Paul's Episcopal Cathedral in Bankers Hill to connect with one another, build community, share stories, and sing choir together. The energy and joy in the room during this rehearsal is palpable. But this is no ordinary church choir. This is Voices of Our City Choir (VOCC), an inspirational nonprofit dedicated to helping those who are unhoused move off the streets and into housing.

Voices of Our City Choir was established in 2016 but didn't find a home at St. Paul's until 2022. Since then, the church has acted as a home base, offering space for the organization to continue their mission of serving the unhoused community.

Steph Johnson is the co-founder, CEO, and creative director of VOCC. Her own background served as the impetus to help others.

"I grew up in a single-parent household, below the poverty line and on assistance. I moved around a lot and I had just always felt a kinship to people on the street," Johnson explains.

At the time Johnson co-

founded VOCC, she was a full-time musician performing with her husband, Rob Thorsen, an acclaimed musician in his own right. But she felt called to serve others.

"I was going around and I was meeting people living unsheltered. I was sitting with people in their tents. This one guy I met was telling me how it didn't matter what they did, because they didn't have a voice," she recalls.

It was a lightbulb moment for Johnson. As a musician, she was drawn to other creatives. A number of people she met on the streets were also creatives, and she formed a bond with them. Johnson says the idea to start a choir sparked from their conversations. She'd soon gather a group of approximately 17 members. The idea was to create a safe space for those who are unhoused to make music, heal, and be treated with dignity and respect, Johnson says.

While there was never a plan for the choir to perform professionally, an opportunity arose for the group to perform a holiday show with Johnson at Bread & Salt in Barrio Logan. Johnson says 300 people showed up to watch the show. The choir



Steph Johnson leads choir rehearsal.

accompanied Johnson on three songs that night.

"The audience heard them sing and they stood up and applauded. ... I was really worried that people would maybe not receive them and support them and love them the way that people with trauma really needed. It taught me and showed me that San Diegans were looking for a way to be involved. They were looking for a way to honor and support the people," Johnson says.

In the seven years since that fateful performance, VOCC has grown into a "full creative arts community for people that are impacted by homelessness," Johnson continues. She says that anywhere from 70 to 100 people show up each week for open choir. Their performance choir has approximately 70 members, and they've helped about 100 people move from homelessness into housing with the help of other city partners like

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Alpha Project, Father Joe's Villages, and Jewish Family Service of San Diego. In addition to the choir, they offer member services like weekly mobile showers, classes, songwriting and other creative workshops, access to nutritious meals, and connections to vital services.

"A lot of people fall through the cracks," Johnson says. "Whether there's turnover at another organization; whether the person gets lost; whether the person that you're trying to help, their phone has been damaged or stolen, it's a very complicated way to stay in touch with people. And because we're always here and the doors are open, a lot of people come here. And they start to trust and they start to feel their self-worth, and they start to open up at their speed, at their pace, then they open up with our case managers about what they need. And then we work on empowerment plans with them."

In 2018, the chorus was the subject of a powerful documentary, *The Homeless Chorus Speaks*, directed by Susan Polis Shutz. The documentary profiled 14 members of VOCC and aired on PBS. They've performed with the San Diego Symphony and with musicians like Jason Mraz. In 2020, the choir competed and made it to the semi-finals on *America's Got Talent*, the NBC reality competition show, an experience Johnson described as "mind-blowing." The exposure helped propel VOCC into the spotlight.

Raven is a member who has benefited from the services VOCC provides. She has been involved with VOCC since the beginning.

"I'm a recovered alcohol addict," she says. "I needed a purpose. This obligation to be here and to sing, it's like a makeover. It makes you have a purpose to come out and voice something and actually like it. And we've gotten so close, we're like family."

Jojo echoes Raven's sentiments. She's been part of VOCC for a year.

"They are my family. They support me and they're there for me. Outreach still helps. They found me safe parking. They took me down to get my bus pass so it has my picture on it. You see the camaraderie here. It's wonderful," she says.

Destiny, another VOCC member, says the feeling of belonging has been transformative.

"From the first day that I walked in, I had not a clue what was awaiting," she recalls. "And what awaits is like magic. It gives me life. Since I've been here, there has been a healing that has taken place. Music is good for the soul."

VOCC has big plans for the future. They just completed a songwriting workshop pilot program at Monarch School, which serves unhoused students, and there are plans to record an EP at Studio West. In addition, they are preparing for a musical to debut

this summer at the La Jolla Playhouse. Upcoming performances, including their biggest show of the year at the Conrad Prebys Performing Arts Center on Dec. 9, can be found on their website.

The feelings of support, love, and acceptance that members gain at VOCC has given them purpose, something Raven says has been vital.

"It makes you feel like ... you fit in, you belong," she adds.

Weekly choir practice is a joyful, energetic experience for members of VOCC, seen here at St. Paul's Episcopal Cathedral.

