

Harlem Boys Choir keeps youth off streets

EDITOR'S NOTE — The Boys Choir of Harlem has earned an international reputation for excellence in music since it was founded in 1968. But the choir, comprised mainly of black youths from poor families, perhaps does its best work in other areas. It takes the youngsters off the streets and steers them toward more productive lives through tutoring and counseling.



NEW YORK (AP) — Nathan G. Simmons, an affable college music major with sights set on Broadway, still remembers the telephone call that turned him away from life on the mean streets of Harlem.

He was ironing his only white shirt nine years ago when the phone rang. Walter Turnbull, director of the Boys Choir of Harlem, was on the line.

"Dr. Turnbull said, 'You've been accepted,' and I was just ecstatic," recalls Simmons, 23. "My mother was sitting at the table and I told her, and she got on the phone and started calling people. It was an honor...and it kept me off the streets."

As a 14-year-old, Simmons remembers "doing basically nothing except hanging out, meeting people who didn't do much except smoke and drink a lot of beer."

Crack invaded the neighborhood a few years later, and many of his former buddies dropped out of high school, "graduating" instead from beer to the cheap, highly addictive smokable cocaine.

But a different world was opening for this teen-ager.

He was performing. He was receiving regular tutoring and counseling and traveling with the choir nationally and internationally; to places other Harlem kids hadn't

even heard about.

The New York Board of Education calculates that about one-quarter of the city's blacks drop out of high school, accounting for 39.2 percent of all dropouts. Blacks comprise only 39.9 percent of the high school population.

Troubled Harlem kids are thought to be among the worst academic performers. But under Turnbull's supervision, Simmons went on to college after leaving the Boys Choir in 1984 and is in his final year at Westminster Choir College, in Princeton, N.J.

It's not a unique story, according to Turnbull. He says that 98 percent of Boys Choir members — all black and most from desperate Harlem backgrounds — graduate from high school and go on to college.

And Simmons' former friends? "A lot of them have fallen down by the wayside. They're involved in drugs," Simmons says. "We don't really have a lot of long conversations, because we are in two different worlds."

The co-founder of the choir, in 1968, spends 18-hour days overseeing the musical, scholastic and social needs of more than 200 young people between the ages of 8 and 18, including a girls' choir established in 1979.

Turnbull, Simmons and others spoke in Turnbull's office — a room dominated by a Baldwin baby grand piano, partially covered by stacks of sheet music, and by shelves bulging with music books.

The office is in old Public School 68, on a floor rented by the choir. Turnbull spoke over a muted background of major third chords, sung in unison. About 30 boys were warming up in a nearby classroom, its windows covered by heavy wire mesh and overlooking a row of tenements disfigured by graffiti, some boarded up and abandoned.

The towering, robust tenor and former public school teacher took over later, praising and cajoling as he conducted a selection of works including Bach's "Christ Lag in Todesbanden" in German. One passage that sounded perfect to the casual listener raised his ire.

"That's unacceptable, what kind of reading is that?" he thundered, slamming a meaty hand down on his note stand. The kids — some in their

mid-teens, all clearly respectful — did it again without a murmur.

Turnbull holds a doctorate in music and is proud of the Boys Choir's international reputation of excellence. Besides German, the ensemble sings in French, Italian, Hebrew and Latin as well as English and has toured much of Europe. It has sung in St. Paul's in London and St.-Germain-des-Prés in Paris and was off to Japan this month.

"It's a very unique sound," Turnbull says, rejecting attempts at comparison with well-known European boys' choirs. Unlike those, the Harlem ensemble includes tenors and basses as well as the traditional trebles.

Turnbull also places emphasis on the non-musical opportunities for choir members.

Tutoring, in subjects ranging from English and mathematics to music theory, is provided six days a week, and some kids go to the choir's

own school. Choir members must maintain a B average.

Three full-time counselors give year-round career, family and adolescent counseling. During the summer, choir members attend day camp in New York City and a live-away camp in the Connecticut countryside.

The choir has received international rave reviews, and Barbara Bush, the president's wife, commented after a June 5 White House performance that the choir's program of all-around care should be duplicated around the world.

But Turnbull and his aides have trouble funding even the one operation.

Despite some generous corporate donations, the program is chronically short of money — \$300,000 was lacking in May from a projected budget of \$1.4 million, although the choir is fully booked with paying performance dates.

Most of the children come from one-parent, low-income or welfare families, and Turnbull said the counselors often have their hands full.

"There are problems within the family, with siblings who might be dealing or messing with drugs, or in some cases even parents," he says. "Poverty is the main problem. It all boils down to poverty."

"Sometimes parental problems are so severe that they make it difficult to come to rehearsals every day, and once they stop coming every day they kind of fall."

The boys also have to fight peer pressure from outsiders.

"Many kids are ribbed," Turnbull says. "But then, their comeback is, 'Have you ever been to Japan? Have you been to Europe? Have you traveled to the Caribbean?'"

"There are all kinds of things that kids in the Boys Choir of Harlem get to do that most kids would never get the chance to do."

Actress Rolle says blacks' role poor in theater

WINSTON-SALEM, N.C. (AP) — Esther Rolle has made a name for herself on stage and on television's "Maude" and "Good Times," but she says the lot of the black actor has improved little since she started in show business in 1942.

"No matter what age I am or what age they require, I generally have to be fat and gray," Rolle, 55, who played the maid Florida on "Maude," said. "They can't see an attractive, mature black grandmother. She has to be gray and decrepit, generally. But a white grandmother can be her age."

Rolle said the best hope for black actors is the small but growing number of black producers. Whites, she said, just don't think of casting blacks in mainstream roles.

Iowans start the betting on reinstating riverboat gambling on the Mississippi

The mighty Mississippi once carried cargo and cotton and dandies up and down the lazy river. Now Iowans are betting these waters will deliver another precious commodity — greenbacks.

Iowa, known more for hogs than high rollers, is moving to revive riverboat gambling, hoping the romance of the past will generate riches for the future.

Across America's heartland, several states are planning or considering gambling ventures to try to bring dollars, jobs and tourists into struggling industrial cities and small towns hit hard this decade by factory closings, the farm depression and the exodus of jobs and people.

"If we were still doing well and had not turned into the great Rust Belt, you would not see this great influx of gambling in the guise of economic development," state Sen. Denny Jacobs, a key supporter of riverboat gambling in Illinois, said. "It's a nice stopgap until we can readjust ourselves and get back on two solid feet."

Soon there will be wagers in the land of Wild Bill Hickok, the gold rush town of Deadwood, S.D. There's gambling talk, too, in Indiana, Mis-

souri and Wisconsin.

That's not to suggest there aren't skeptics and critics. Some argue the stakes are too low to be an economic salvation, the sites too ho-hum or bleak for tourism.

Others fear games of chance will erode the American work ethic.

"When gambling comes in, all of the other social crimes increase," Owen Primavera, spokesman for the Iowa Alliance Against Casino Gambling, said. "It increases loan sharking. It increases drug traffic... (and) prostitution."

Supporters insist they intend to create family entertainment.

"Those traditional Midwest heartland values are... still going to be there," Larry Reed, executive vice president of the Davenport Chamber of Commerce in Iowa, said.

The only change, proponents say, is the Midwest will be doing more to strut its stuff.

"The Mississippi is well known worldwide," Don Rinehart, executive vice president of the River City Chamber of Commerce in Iowa, said. "(It's) a gold mine in our backyard and we

haven't taken advantage of it."

"It's all right to be homespun," Jacobs said. "That's part of the charm of the Midwest. But it may be time we get a little more sophisticated."

And gambling seems a logical step with the increasing popularity of bingo, lotteries and horse and dog tracks. In North Dakota, for example, a record \$205 million was wagered on games of chance last year, including pull tabs, blackjack and bingo.

More than 30 states have lotteries and more than 40 have parimutuel betting. William Thompson, a University of Nevada-Las Vegas management and public administration professor and co-author of a book on casinos, said.

There's more to come:

In Deadwood, S.D., there will be poker, blackjack and slot machines, probably in October.

Voters this spring approved gambling. City proceeds will go to historic preservation in this once rip-roaring Black Hills town where Hickok's last poker game ended with a bullet in his head.



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