

City of Sault Ste. Marie

Medal of Merit Award Presentation – May 7, 2011

REMARKS MADE IN INTRODUCING THIS YEAR'S MEDAL OF MERIT WINNERS BY:

SHARON GRAHAM & MARY ELLEN SZADKOWSKI, MEDAL OF MERIT COMMITTEE

Northland Barbershop Chorus

Music is a strong thread in the fabric of our culture. From the time our parents sing lullabies to us until hymns are sung at our funerals, music is an integral part of our lives—helping us celebrate both joy and sorrow.

Tonight we honour a group of men in our community who have shared their gift of music with us for over 50 years. We would like to thank Sault Theatre Workshop, Harry Houston, an honouree from last year, and more than 27 people who submitted letters of support. The Northland Barbershop Chorus was formed in 1959 when four men met to sing four part harmony, using the voicing and style of the traditional barbershop quartet. Their group grew to 26 members and by 1961 they received their official charter from the Barbershop Harmony Society and became members of this international organization that has more than 800 chapters and 25,000 members across North America. In 2011, the Northland Barbershop Chorus celebrates its 50th anniversary and we are delighted to honour them tonight.

In preparation for this evening Mary Ellen and I had a very good meeting with the Director, Bob Shami and the President, Folgo Della Vedova where they shared with us memories of many venues, especially their recent 50th anniversary celebration, and experiences which brought us to tears and much laughter. We learned a lot more about them than can be shared here this evening but we are going to try to capture some facts that you will find interesting too. Their current membership is 51 men, 7 of whom are Americans living on the U.S. side of the border. Their youngest member is Jessie Lethbridge at 18 and the eldest by age number, but young at heart, is Graham MacHattie at 88. Average age of the chorus is 58 years and this is in the top 25% of the 800 chapters in North America—meaning the other 75% have older memberships. The Chorus is involved in Music Mondays taking their music into the schools, covering many eras and types of songs. With other factors like

the current popularity of television shows like Glee, this has had a major impact on youth—especially the males, making it cool to sing and belong and participate in music. The careers amongst the 51 members of the chorus are varied—one a nurse, a brew master, and many retired teachers, just to name a few.

When someone joins the Northland Chorus they tend to stay members a long time. They affectionately refer to it as a voluntary life sentence and their \$140 yearly membership is also said to be the cheapest therapy! We asked if any of them smoked; apparently a few pipes but no inhaling. We'd like to share with you a few of the comments from the amazing 27 letters of support for this nomination.

In his letter of support from the Sault Ste. Marie Museum, Kim Forbes says,

“The chorus has played an integral role in the development and preservation of harmonized music in our city. They serve as ambassadors for our city when performing for audiences in other locales, including performances in the United States.”

A letter from the First United Presbyterian Church in Sault Michigan shared about the enjoyment of this group performing over the years and highlighted two very meaningful times at funerals and what it meant to their families and friends.

Susan Parr, Music Director at Emmanuel United Church wrote,

“They have generously given their time and talents to participate in... fundraising concerts we have held. They are always willing to come to our aid and never expect anything for themselves, except smiles and maybe some humming along.”

David Shier from the Sault Area Hospital said:

“The commitment, professionalism, and talent each of these chorus members possess is truly outstanding. They come together for three hours each week, for ten months of the year, to practice and perfect their craft. That in itself is an incredible accomplishment not to mention the performances that they provide year after year in order to improve the lives of others in this community and surrounding area.”

Victoria Presbyterian Church representatives said,

“Not only does this chorus present a full concert, but as the members are enjoying homemade pie following the concert, they spontaneously burst into singing.”

Cathy Johnson, of Senior Services for the City shares:

“Music is a universal language and these gentlemen through their performances bring all our senior friends together heart and soul. When you experience a performance with this group perhaps at a nursing home and you see how their music brings smiles to old, worn, tired faces and twinkles to otherwise sad, lonely eyes, you know you have participated in something very special.”

The motto of the Northland Barbershop Chorus “We Sing... That They Shall Speak” is a hallmark in our community. Since 1995 when Alana MacIntyre asked for a donation of \$30 to support a patient who needed a device to help him communicate, the Chorus has continued to support the Speech and Language Pathology Program at Sault Area Hospital.

Each year the Northland Barbershop Chorus donates the surplus from their annual show to the hospital and they donate their revenues from performances in Sault Michigan to War Memorial Hospital Speech-Language Therapy Department. Over the years, this has amounted to more than \$60,000.

The Northland Barbershop Chorus members love to sing and they love to share that gift with the community. Their support has helped more than 21 charitable organizations and brought joy to thousands of people—young and old.

Their notoriety has spread and we understand that our very own Northland Chorus will be the cover-boys in a future issue of their International magazine, The Harmonizer.

When we read the many pages of the dates detailing their performances over the past 10 years, the vast array of venues was impressive. They’ve healed, touched and shared their wide array of music at weddings, birthday, anniversary, Valentine’s, Christmas, celebrations, retirement homes, hospitals, ice cream socials, pageants, Musicfest, charity groups, coaching clinics, carnivals, service clubs—the Legion in Kincardine, being a high water mark for their group, and at funerals, churches of many different faiths and now regularly in the schools and assisting theatre groups. Their range of music from early hymns and popular music of 100 years ago to pop hits by Elton John and the Beach Boys, has been enjoyed by thousands and thousands during the past 50 years. Their volunteerism has raised thousands of dollars for many groups which we find remarkable because they are not a service club themselves. We look forward to hearing them grow their ever expanding repertoire.

Tonight we are honoured to celebrate the accomplishments of the Northland Barbershop Chorus and their contribution to the quality of life for the citizens of Sault Ste. Marie. For more than 50 years they have shared their love of music with us and we are proud to present to them the City of Sault Ste. Marie Medal of Merit.

We would like to invite Bob Shami, Director of the Chorus since 1992, and Folgo Della Vedova, current President of the Chorus, to accept the award on behalf of the members.

