



# VOCAL ESSENCE Vintage Voices

## Year End Evaluation Report 2015

### About Vintage Voices

Vintage Voices is a new choral program developed by VocalEssence that integrates the arts into the everyday lives of older adults. This population faces barriers to participating in activities—including cost, mobility, and access to trained artists. Vintage Voices mitigates these barriers by bringing a free, professional quality choral program to assisted living communities and senior centers. The program includes 12 choral rehearsals with trained musicians that culminates in a formal choir performance in front of an audience.

To assess the major achievements of the program's first year, The Improve Group conducted interviews with activity directors from each site. Choir members also provided feedback about Vintage Voices during wrap-up sessions after the final performance.

### Improves physical and mental health

Vintage Voices programming focuses on the process of singing together while incorporating sensory-rich activities and social time during choir practices. Research suggests this interactive and ongoing approach elicits health benefits such as increased sense of well-being, slowing of cognitive decline, and reduced depression.<sup>1</sup>

During wrap-up conversations, many choir members noted that singing made them feel good and they find themselves singing the music throughout the day. One singer said that for the first time in years should could wake up each morning knowing what day it was without having to check the calendar. Additionally, choir members talked about gaining increases in physical stamina and energy because of the choir. Many singers reported increased lung capacity, which allowed them to sing longer phrases without running out of breath.

Activities such as learning to read sheet music, singing in foreign languages, and performing in front of an audience led to increased mental stimulation and self-esteem among participants. The impact was most noticeable in participants with memory loss or stroke. Activity directors said that choir members with dementia would hum the tune of a song after practice and people who have trouble speaking because of stroke could sing clearly.

### Customized to meet choir member needs

Vintage Voices adapted programming to make participation easier for older adults. In order to address common aging issues such as dementia and physical limitations, the choir provided large-print music folders, music stands, assigned seating charts, and nametags. These customizations were essential in achieving full engagement and participation among choir members. To further support choir members, those who had cognitive difficulties and memory loss received individualized support from other singers or site staff.

*In 2015, **130***

*Vintage Voices choir  
members joined  
**7** choirs at **6** sites*

*When you're down, whistle a  
happy tune — or sing it too!*

*– Choir Member*

*The thing that was most interesting and  
challenging to me was learning how to  
read and sing the notes. I am usually  
singing all over the place so being taught  
to sing in one voice was kind of cool.*

*– Choir Member*

*Some of our memory care could only fol-  
low through for so long, so they would  
have vocal responses that didn't make  
sense. Rob and John normalized the behav-  
ior so that it didn't become a problem.*

*– Activity Director*

<sup>1</sup>Lehmberg, L.J., & Fung, C.V. (2010). Benefits of Music Participation for Senior Citizens: A Review of the Literature. *Music Education Research International*, (Volume 0).

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Participants said the choir director and accompanist were extremely patient and adjusted the choir's pace if they noticed struggling members. Vintage Voices staff adapted each choir to meet the needs of the members by selecting music that would resonate with the community.

## Opportunities to socialize

Vintage Voices provides opportunities for choir members to connect with each other, family members, and people from the community. The social time at the end of each practice allowed choir members to rekindle old friendships and create new ones, many of which extended beyond the choir practice and into daily lives. As a part of the program, choir members attended a VocalEssence concert, where they were able to strengthen their relationships with each other and experience the art that they were themselves practicing.

***Dementia impacts family relationships. Once they see them perform they see their loved ones in a viable way again.***

***– Activity Director***

Activity directors observed that Vintage Voices helped choir members reconnect with their families. Family, friends, and the community were invited to attend the final performances and receptions. Attending the performances was an opportunity for family members to once again see their loved ones apart from the symptoms of dementia, disability, or old age.

## Building community

During the 12-week program, choir members formed bonds over the music selection and reminisced about the past. These bonds helped each choir develop a group identity that grew stronger towards the end of the program. Choir members received customized polo shirts and branded music packets, which helped legitimize the group. Each group also voted on a name for their choir. The community Vintage Voices created reached into dining areas, card rooms, and other spaces. Activity directors reported that memory care patients in particular were more likely to be included in outside activities because of the choir.

***Even the residents who were not in the choir came to the concert and sat in the front row and cheered them on. There was a lot of bonding.***

***– Activity Director***

## Benefits to participating organizations

The participating organizations were overwhelmingly impressed by the quality of the program and the impact Vintage Voices had on choir members. Activity directors observed firsthand the therapeutic value of participating in music through the change in members' moods. As one director put it, "the smiles on their faces makes my job easier." Unlike many programs, Vintage Voices took responsibility for recruiting and logistics, which eased the burden on activity directors. All of the activity directors said Vintage Voices was an extraordinary experience they would love to do again.

***I think it's just a beautiful opportunity... it's a learning opportunity, but it's also very therapeutic.***

***– Activity Director***

## Benefits of using trained artists

Vintage Voices staff are professional artists who have been trained to work with older populations. Having worked with multiple choirs across a range of abilities, they know that the details matter. Both activity directors and choir members remarked that Vintage Voices staff came prepared to each practice with labeled binders and printed music. The training staff received in working with the older adult community allowed them to provide an additional level of individualized support that volunteers often cannot. The high-level of professionalism created a comfortable, safe place for choir members to learn.

***Sometimes I think I can't do it. But we get someone like you and we can do anything.***

***– Choir member***

## Future considerations

Activity directors and choir members were extremely thrilled with their experience with Vintage Voices. However, they had some ideas for improving future choirs. To reach participation goals, Vintage Voices should continue to work closely with activity directors to recruit choir members of all abilities. Men, in particular, were more hesitant to join the singing group. Making the choir more comfortable for men will benefit recruitment in the future. Some members were uncomfortable singing because of diminished voices. Recruiting volunteer singers from VocalEssence to participate in the choirs would add vocal support and provide Vintage Voices singers the confidence they need to succeed.

In addition, some choir members in the residential program sites had trouble remembering choir practices and frequently needed reminders. Other choir members in non-residential programs had trouble accessing transportation to practices, as many of them no longer drive and rely on public transportation. Vintage Voices should continue to work closely with partner sites to make it easier for choir members to attend rehearsals.