SOUNDS GOOD!
CHOIR

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South Side Good Memories Choir Launches at Kroc Center,
A One-of-a-Kind Music and Brain-Health Program

(Chicago, IL)—Saturday afternoons at the Kroc Community Center in Chicago's West Pullman neighborhood are sounding a lot different this fall thanks to the South Side Good Memories choir, a new community-based choral program for older adults that combines music and wellness education. Grounded in the rich musical traditions of Chicago's South Side, this community choir is designed to harness the proven power of music to support brain health, strengthen memory, and build meaningful connections among participants. While it's fun and there are no auditions, the choral program also seeks to address brain-health inequity among predominantly African American communities by providing much-needed information about dementia: destigmatizing it, detecting it early and raising awareness about the effectiveness of non-medical interventions like singing in a choir.

Why a Choir?

Research consistently shows that singing in a group does more than lift spirits. It actively engages the brain, supports cognitive function, reduces isolation, and promotes overall wellness. Good Memories brings this evidence-based approach to South Side communities, framed not as a clinical intervention but as a joyful experience that honors each participant—who they are and where they are on their journey with memory loss. The program is open to older adults with memory concerns, or older adults with memory loss and their "singing buddies"—care partners, friends, or volunteers. No prior singing experience is required and there is no fee for the program; it's donation based.

Preventing Health Inequity

Racial and ethnic disparities exist in dementia care because of many barriers. As presented by the Alzheimer's Association in its commissioned survey and report, "Race, Ethnicity and Alzheimer's in America": "Stigma, cultural differences, awareness and understanding, and the ability to obtain a diagnosis, manage the disease, and access care and support services for dementia vary widely depending on race, ethnicity, geography and socioeconomic status." Providing access to any healthcare-related intervention to communities of color and white communities at the same time prevents health inequity. Sounds Good Choir, Chicagoland's largest no-audition choral organization for older adults, created the Good Memories program in 2018 as the sister to its Sounds Good

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community choirs for cognitively healthy adults age 55 and older. For eight years, the Good Memories choir in Chicago's Gold Coast neighborhood was the only choral program for people with dementia and their care partners in all of Illinois.

Redesigning a Nationally Recognized Model

When Sounds Good Choir was finally able to expand the program geographically, a South Side choir was at the top of the list. By now a nationally recognized model, the Good Memories model needed to be substantially redesigned to reflect the culture, history, and lived realities of South Side communities. The organization hired Dr. Treasyri (pronounced "treasure") Williams Wood, SLPD, CCC-SLP, a consultant with the rare combination of skills needed to launch the program: Expertise in dementia, community organizing, and music. Williams Wood is a speech-language pathologist who provides neurogenic speech-language pathology services, leads community outreach to expand equitable access to care across Chicago and is a classically trained soprano. Together with Sounds Good Choir co-founders Sandy Siegel Miller and Jonathan Miller, Williams Wood established a community advisory board to oversee the program's creation.

Among the predominantly African American communities which the program would serve, Williams Wood conducted a needs-assessment study which revealed adaptations to the Gold Coast model that would be essential to the South Side program's success. Bringing the program to the communities it would serve so they could have a hand in its redesign was critical. Ultimately, the redesigned program was created with guidance from South Side residents in partnership with the South Side Community Advisory Board, Sounds Good Choir, community anchor partners Share Network and Center for Better Aging, supported by partners in the Arts, Illinois Arts Council with funding from the National Endowment for the Arts.

Eliminating Barriers to Health Access & Education

Of the many barriers between Black Americans and access to preventive and early diagnosis of dementia, as well as support as the disease advances, are limited financial resources, lack of transportation, damaging stereotypes and stigma, cultural values. Sounds Good Choir addressed these one by one through its redesign. To remove financial barriers to participation, the Good Memories program did away with fees, adopting a donation-based structure. In response to the stigma around dementia and the lack of information about it within the African American community, the program was adapted to emphasize brain wellness and memory improvement, in addition to music and community. This also helped break throught the deeply held cultural value of protecting the dignity and privacy of elders that often keeps African American families from bringing their loved one to beneficial programs like Good Memories.

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Major Adaptations to Original Good Memories Model

▲ A donation- versus fee-based model eliminates financial barriers to attendance.

▲ Care partners are not required to attend because participants are supported by trained volunteers during rehearsals. This frees care partners to take care of other errands, responsibilities or have a brief respite from caregiving.

▲ Brain health education is integrated throughout program in accessible, culturally grounded ways.

▲ Transportation support is a core component of the program.

▲ The venue is located in an area of the South Side that reflects the breadth of South Side communities, instead of concentrating resources only in gentrifying areas.

▲ Inclusive program design welcomes participants with moderate dementia, even those in advanced stages.

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