

A CASE STUDY

# A Singing Community:

Chicago's Good Memories Choir

GOOD MEMORIES  
CHOIR

a program of  
Sounds Good Choir



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This case study was prepared by Elspeth Revere, President of Ravenswood Consulting, and is intended to describe the different elements that make up the Good Memories choir and result in its success. Interviews were also intended to provide feedback and solicit ideas for improvement. [ElspethRevere@gmail.com](mailto:ElspethRevere@gmail.com).

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## CASE STUDY REPORT GOOD MEMORIES CHOIR

# Executive Summary

April 2026

Good Memories is a choir for people with early-stage dementia, their care partners, and a set of trained volunteers. The choir began in 2018. Currently, there are 50 singers. The goals of Good Memories are to create a community that helps counteract the isolation often felt by people with dementia and their caregivers, offer the benefits of singing to people with dementia, and, through performances, show the public what people with early-stage memory loss look like and can do.

Good Memories is one of two programs of Sounds Good Choir, a nonprofit organization founded in 2016 by Jonathan Miller and Sandy Siegel Miller. Its first program, Sounds Good, consists of eight no-audition choirs for cognitively healthy seniors throughout the Chicago area. Its second program, Good Memories, was inspired and informed by the Giving Voice Initiative in Minnesota, which provided the model and the inspiration that became Good Memories choir.

As Good Memories completes its eighth year, it is beginning an ambitious plan to establish additional choirs for people with dementia throughout the Chicago region. This case study was conducted to inform new partners, collaborators, staff, funders, and participants in the new Good Memories choirs about the components of the model. The report is based on 25 interviews with singers, care partners, volunteers, choir leaders, and supporters. *Remarkably, the opinions expressed about the choir were uniformly enthusiastic and positive.*

The case study describes the different elements that make up this choir and result in its success. These include:

**REHEARSALS, PERFORMANCES AND CONDUCTING.** Rehearsals are held for 90 minutes each week over 15 weeks, culminating in a performance for family and friends. The conducting and piano accompaniment are highly professional. The conductor makes modest accommodations to meet the needs of people with dementia.

**COMMUNITY.** There is a strong culture in which all are welcomed and treated equally, no one feels like a client, and dementia is never discussed. A break in the rehearsal each week for snacks encourages members to get to know each other and creates a sense of community.

**ADMINISTRATIVE SUPPORT AND INFRASTRUCTURE.** Sounds Good Choir provides the administrative, financial, staffing, and other essential organizational support for the Good Memories program.

**RESEARCH.** Good Memories is based on research about the value of choral singing for people with dementia and contributes to research by conducting new studies on the topic.

This study found that Good Memories has achieved an extraordinarily high level of satisfaction among its members and great respect from financial supporters and dementia-serving professionals. This may be due to the combination of the following factors: (1) Choral singing feels good—singers breathe deeply and work together to create an artistic outcome; (2) the conductor and program director exude enthusiasm and warmth which results in an atmosphere of good will that creates a positive experience for all; (3) the professionalism of the conducting and piano accompaniment create a high quality musical experience and outcome; (4) attention is paid to the details of building culture and community; and (5) Fourth Presbyterian Church is a comfortable and friendly environment to rehearse and perform.



THE GOOD MEMORIES CHOIR EXPERIENCE

## The Rehearsal

It is Tuesday morning, just before 10 am. Members of the Good Memories choir begin arriving at Fourth Presbyterian Church on Chicago's Michigan Avenue for the weekly choir rehearsal. They arrive early, eager to catch up with friends, to bask in the warmth of the community, and to sing together.

**“When you walk into the room it is so inviting. It gives you a warm feeling.”**

Choir members are welcomed by the choir coordinator who takes attendance. They head up to the 4th floor where volunteers are putting out snacks. Choir members greet each other with smiles and hugs and catch up on each other's lives.

There is a happy buzz of conversation. As people arrive, it is notable that all the name tags have only a first name. There is no distinction between singers with dementia, caregivers, and volunteers.

The rehearsal begins. The accompanist sits down at the piano. The conductor quiets the group and begins with simple vocal warmups. The energy and goodwill in the room are focused expectantly on the conductor.

After the vocal warmups there is a rousing rendition of “Oh, What a Beautiful Morning.” Most people stand while they sing and accompany the music with well-known movements.

The conductor begins work on the songs that are being learned for performance. He gently, skillfully, patiently, and often with humor, helps the sopranos, altos, tenors, and basses practice their parts in sections and then together. It is a tenet of Good Memories that he never criticizes an individual but works with the members of each small group as they learn the music.

**“It's a joy.”**

Through the morning, and over fifteen weeks of rehearsals, he expertly manages the limited rehearsal time to ensure that the choir has learned each of the seven or eight songs that will be performed in concert.

During the rehearsal, each singer with dementia sits with a singing volunteer, who helps them follow the music. These volunteers become choir friends, and the relationship sometimes lasts for many years. After about 45 minutes, the rehearsal pauses for a few minutes of “Move and Groove,” a light exercise and stretching session accompanied by improvised piano music. After that, there is a break for snacks and conversation.

The practice resumes with work on another one or two songs. Members with recent birthdays are celebrated with an enthusiastic rendition of “Happy Birthday.” The 90-minute rehearsal ends with another sing-along, “Happy Trails to You,” also with gestures. Choir members trickle out, breathing more deeply and with a sense of increased well-being.

Singers—without exception—say that the rehearsals are fun. They like the music, the community, the snacks, the range of activities, the pacing, the conducting, and the accompaniment. They describe the atmosphere as “warmly affectionate.” They like the lack of distinction between those with dementia and others—the rehearsal is about singing, not dementia. Many say they are happier when they leave than when they arrive and feel like the choir members are friends.

## Introduction

Good Memories is a choir for people with dementia, their care partners, and a set of trained volunteers. The choir began in 2018. Currently, there are about 50 singers.

Good Memories is one of two programs of Sounds Good Choir, a nonprofit organization founded in 2016 by Jonathan Miller and Sandy Siegel Miller<sup>1</sup>. It began by establishing no-audition choirs for neurologically healthy senior citizens. There are now eight Sounds Good choirs in the Chicago area.

That same year that Sounds Good began, its two co-founders visited the Giving Voice Chorus in Minnesota, an organization whose mission is to facilitate the creation of choirs for people with dementia and their caregivers. The Giving Voice model was created by Marge Ostroushko, a radio producer and event planner, whose mother had dementia, and Mary Lenard, the former executive director of the Alzheimer's Association Minnesota Chapter. It is based on their observation that people at early stages of dementia, living outside care facilities, are the most socially isolated of all people in the dementia spectrum. They wanted to try using choral singing as not only a way to create community to counteract the forces of isolation, but also to put a public face on what early-stage memory loss looks like.

After visiting Giving Voice, the Millers decided to establish a dementia choir for Chicago. Good Memories would be based on research that demonstrates the benefits of choral singing to people with dementia. Equally importantly, it would build a community to help address the loneliness, depression, and stigma that often accompanies dementia.

With the help of a toolkit published by Giving Voice that spelled out the components of the model and ongoing consulting from the Giving Voice leadership (which continues to this day), Jon and Sandy launched Good Memories in 2018. Since then, Good Memories has become the second successful program of its parent organization, Sounds Good Choir, which is now in the process of planning additional dementia choirs throughout the Chicago area. This case study represents one tool for the expansion, by describing the components of the existing Good Memories choir.

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<sup>1</sup> Jonathan Miller, co-founder and artistic director, had extensive prior choral conducting experience with Chicago a cappella. Dr. Sandy Siegel Miller, co-founder and program director, is a retired clinical psychologist and a deacon of the Episcopal Church.

This report is based on 25 interviews with singers, care partners, volunteers, choir leaders, and supporters. Remarkably, the opinions expressed about the choir by the singers and observers were uniformly enthusiastic and positive.

This report is intended to describe the different elements that make up this choir and result in its success. Interviews were also intended to provide feedback and solicit ideas for improvement.



## Music & Choral Singing

Good Memories is, at its core, a musical singing group, intended to be both focused and fun, which learns new repertoire and performs a concert of choral music three times a year. The well-known benefits of singing seem to accrue to all who participate, including singers with dementia, care partners, and volunteers. Contrary to common stereotypes, singers with dementia often continue to be able to learn new music, even as their cognitive skills decline.

Each rehearsal opens and closes with two regular sing-alongs. The remainder of the repertoire each session is selected by the artistic director and program

director from published choral music whose level of difficulty matches the skill level of the choir members. The music is usually in three or four vocal parts. The repertoire is a mix of familiar and unfamiliar—occasionally, a brand-new work is included. Generally, the fall session consists of holiday music, the spring session has a changing array of themes, and the shorter, eight-week summer session is 1960s rock 'n' roll.

Singers do not audition. They self-assign to a section (soprano, alto, tenor, bass). Some read music, others do not. Some have been singing all their lives, while others are completely new to singing.

Over time, some adjustments have been made to support the needs of people with dementia and those with little prior singing experience:

**LYRIC SHEETS (WORDS ONLY)** for each song are provided to help those who are confused or distracted by sheet music.

**A "MELODY" SECTION** has been designated for those who do not want to sing harmony but may not have voices in the soprano range.

**VOLUNTEERS WHO HAVE RECEIVED TRAINING** in communicating with people with dementia are assigned to be "singing buddies." They sit next to singers with dementia and help them follow the music.

**THERE ARE A MODEST NUMBER OF SONGS TO LEARN** each session (six to seven, plus the sing-along melodies which bookend the performances) and the music is selected to be easy to learn.

The conductor makes only a few adjustments to his normal techniques: he uses language that stays in the present (not referring to what he has gone over in the past with "do you remember" because people with dementia generally will not); he moves on when the choir has learned a section well-enough, rather than striving for perfection; he works on small sections of music at a time and tries not to make singers wait too long for their turn to sing; and he never singles out an individual for criticism or praise.

He leads each rehearsal and the final concert with warmth and humor, keeping all members engaged. The conductor's skilled time management ensures that all the music is learned before the performance. The conductor effectively holds the attention of the group while the rehearsal is underway. The singing buddies make sure that inexperienced singers and those with dementia are keeping up, relieving the conductor of that responsibility. Singers report that the rehearsal feels relaxed but with a sense of purpose.

The conductor feels and returns the goodwill of the singers. He addresses everyone by name. He makes sure that he is fully present (mirroring the singers with dementia, who are living in the present); he chats with singers and care partners at the breaks and gets to know them. Both

**"Singing is one of the top ten or so things we can all do to keep our minds sharp."**



the conducting and piano accompaniment<sup>2</sup> are highly professional, something noted by many appreciative choir members.

## Concerts

A public performance represents the capstone of each session. It is held on a Tuesday afternoon in Buchanan Chapel at Fourth Presbyterian Church. There is no ticket charge. The performance is the culmination of the session and a chance to demonstrate the music that has been learned to friends and family. For family members of singers with dementia, the concert provides a welcome show of accomplishment to counter the day-to-day experience of cognitive loss.

The performance is also a way to reduce the stigma faced by people with dementia by showing the public what people with dementia look like and can do. There is often media coverage. The songs are interspersed with spoken narration, prepared in advance, which may include

background on the music and personal stories of singers' experience in

<sup>2</sup>Amy Wurtz, accompanist and well-regarded alternate conductor, is a composer, teacher, concert performer, and long-time pianist and conductor with both Sounds Good and Good Memories choirs.

the choir.

Most singers report satisfaction with the concerts. They invite their friends and family members to attend. Both the stories told by the singers and the conductor's discussion of the music being performed are popular features among the choir members and their guests.

## Culture & Community

One of the remarkable characteristics of Good Memories choir is the equal importance placed on music, culture, and community. Dr. Sandy Siegel Miller, program director, is in charge of building the community and maintaining the culture that the program director and conductor both want in the choir. They watch carefully to make sure that no one is overlooked, everyone feels "seen," and the values of kindness, "radical" welcome and hospitality, inclusiveness, and fun are expressed through how everyone treats each other.

These values may occasionally be tested, but they are reinforced and persistent. Choir members see them modeled and participate—for example, through welcoming new singers or stepping in to help a singer whose singing buddy is absent. Building community is not an easy task, but it is a notable success that, while participants may come and go, the culture and feeling of community and connection persists. This was attested to by almost every choir member who was interviewed for this project. Each said that they enjoyed the community and looked forward to seeing people in the choir each week. Some say that they have made friends in the choir. Others note that they would like to spend time together in an occasional activity outside of the rehearsals. Everyone identified the snack breaks and the time spent socializing during the break as contributing to the distinctive culture of Good Memories.



## The People of the Choir

The Good Memories choir model<sup>3</sup> defines choir makeup as people with early-stage dementia (one-third), their care partners (one-third), and volunteers (one-third). This is an aspirational mix. The reality is that membership is more fluid and no one is turned away, even if their disease progresses beyond early-stage, or if their family member with dementia passes away, but they want to stay in the choir. The value of radical hospitality results in a welcome to all.

Because there are no auditions and everyone is welcome, there are singers who do not read music and have never sung before, along with those who have sung all their lives. The choir accommodates that full range of music experience as well.

**SINGERS WITH DEMENTIA.** At present,<sup>4</sup> there are ten singers with acknowledged dementia who are members of the choir. The choir is particularly intended to address their needs. It provides them with

<sup>3</sup>The model, and each of its components, is based on the Giving Voice toolkit and experience.

<sup>4</sup>April 26

something fun and productive that they can do in a group of people that includes those with dementia and those without, in a setting that is caring and respectful. It enables people to use existing singing skills or acquire new ones with attention to their abilities and limitations.

Research on singing and dementia points to the ability of music to tap into long-past memories and to express emotions. It suggests that people with dementia retain their ability to sing in tune even as other cognitive abilities diminish.<sup>5</sup> The choir seeks to improve their sense of well-being, reduce loneliness and depression, and make them feel respected and appreciated. It provides them with an environment in which dementia is perfectly normal; no one must explain or excuse their behavior. No one is treated like a client. Dementia is not the subject of the choir and is rarely, if ever, mentioned at a rehearsal.



**CARE PARTNERS.** Singers with dementia are expected to attend the choir rehearsals and performances with care partners, in part to signal that Good Memories is not a daycare program. There are currently ten care partners in the choir. Some of the care partners are family members or friends; others are paid caregivers. They are invited to sing if they wish to.

Family care partners report that there are very few activities for people with early-stage dementia. This is one activity they can do together with their relative with dementia that is fun for both. They like having the opportunity to sing in their own vocal section while their family member with dementia is

<sup>5</sup> Andre P. Smith, et.al; Choral singing and dementia: Exploring musicality as embodied and relational accomplishment. Journal of Aging Studies, 2022.

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**“I love coming to choir and being with other people.”**

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paired up with a volunteer singing buddy, sometimes in another vocal section. Others just take a break and sit and watch. Paid caregivers tend to stay close to their charge, even if that person has a singing buddy.



One aspiration for the choir is that care partners will get to know each other and provide support for each other. This may not be occurring as hoped. Because of the equality with which everyone is treated, they don't always know who the other care partners are. The family care partners who were interviewed reported that they like coming to the choir and generally enjoy being around

other care partners but have other support networks elsewhere.

**OTHER SINGERS WITH MEMORY LOSS.** There is a small group of individuals (estimated at seven) with early-stage dementia or concerns about their memories who come to Good Memories for the brain health benefits that singing and community provide but who may not yet be disclosing their health status and continue to live independently. They register as “volunteers,” and come without a care partner. Most have a friend in the choir who has told them they will be welcomed there. This is another example of how the membership model is fluid. Changes are being made to the registration process that will help everyone see a place for themselves when they sign up.

#### **VOLUNTEER SINGING BUDDIES.**

Choir volunteers are assigned to singers with dementia to help them as needed. There are currently twelve choir volunteers. They report helping their singer keep track of where they are in the music as sections are rehearsed. But they also become choir “friends,” bringing the comfort of familiarity to singers with dementia and advocating for their needs. In some cases, people with dementia do not know that this is a formal relationship but just think they are sitting next to a nice, helpful person.

Volunteers attend one online training about how to communicate with people with dementia. There are volunteer meetings where they can share experiences. Some report that they would like to know more

about “their” singer so that they can interact with them better and be more helpful. Volunteers who serve as singing “buddies” are very thoughtful and analytical about what the singers in the choir with dementia need. For example, one asked for chairs with arms, and another noted that the conductor needs to make transitions more slowly, especially during the performances.

Volunteers enjoy singing with the choir and the choir community. They feel good about the contributions they are making to their singing buddies. They like the training. Some noted that they now better understand people with dementia. They feel appreciated as volunteers. For many, this is their only volunteer commitment.

**VOLUNTEER GUEST SINGERS.** There are an additional ten singers, most of whom are members of a Sounds Good choir (for cognitively healthy older adults) that meets in the same location on Mondays, who have been asked by the conductor to come to Good Memories to help fill out the voice sections and improve the final performance.

(Originally, these singers came just for the last two or three rehearsals of the choir before the performance and then sang in the concert, but there is no longer complete overlap in repertoire between the Sounds Good and Good Memories choirs.) These singers feel that they are serving the choir and its conductor by attending and see themselves as providing a valued volunteer service. They may know very little about the special intent of this choir or about singers with dementia or their disease.

**CHOIR STAFF & LEADERSHIP.** With such a diverse group of participants, the role of the staff and musical leaders are particularly important. In addition to the already described roles of the conductor, Jonathan Miller, and the program director, Dr. Sandy Siegel Miller, key contributions are made by Helen Gagel, choir coordinator, who matches singing buddies to singers with memory loss, chairs the volunteer meetings, communicates with the singers, and takes attendance; Amy Wurtz, accompanist and alternative conductor, who works closely with the conductor to provide the singers with musical guidance during rehearsals and performances and improvises masterfully during the stretch and movement break; and Lynn Clark, Sounds Good board chair and constant Good Memories choir volunteer who manages the music distribution, helps support the culture, and befriends members of the choir.

## Recruitment

The choir's leadership believes that it can accommodate additional members with dementia. In addition, though attrition is small and many people remain in the choir for long periods of time, there are a few each year who move or need to change their schedule. Though no one is asked to leave, people with dementia may lose their care partner or the progression of their disease may push them past the stage where they are able to attend.

Most of the choir members interviewed for this report learned about it from people they know. While research shows the benefits of singing for those with memory loss, and the choir is very welcoming to first-time singers when they attend, people who have not had previous singing experience are often hesitant to join the choir. To date, most members have come because of a persuasive friend or the suggestion of an Alzheimer's-serving professional.

Recruitment has not been a formal process in the past but that is changing. Recruiting is initially focused on senior residences, social service professionals, medical providers, and faith-based organizations. Outreach materials and plans have been developed that emphasize personal connections.

Other possible sources of new choir members are the eight Sounds Good choirs. People who are already singing with a Sounds Good choir do not need to be convinced about the pleasure and benefits of singing. At present there are four members of Good Memories who moved from a Sounds Good choir when their memories declined. Providing an easy transition from a Sounds Good choir to Good Memories is a goal of the choir's leaders, who see it as a "continuum of care," analogous to what happens in some residential care facilities.

## Organizational Infrastructure

Good Memories is one of the two programs of the nonprofit organization, Sounds Good Choir. As such, it is supported by the administrative structure of Sounds Good Choir, which has a small staff of four full-time and two part-time employees, plus a few contractors, all led by executive director Anne Schankin. Like all nonprofit organizations, it provides staff support to the Board of Directors, including the Board committee that oversees Good Memories. Other responsibilities include marketing, communications, payroll, cash flow management, accounting, strategic planning, and fundraising.

More specific to choirs, it handles registration, nametags, contracts for the accompanists, and ordering and licensing the music, as well as preparing the music folders and lyric sheets for Good Memories. It also "produces" the concerts, including finding and working with the venue and preparing the printed programs.

## Finances

The 2026 expense budget for the Good Memories program is \$343,000. That represents about 26% of Sounds Good Choir's budget and includes costs to support two additional Good Memories choirs expected to begin in the Fall. Costs of the choir include the conductor, pianist, and concert musicians, sheet music and licensing, and space rental for rehearsals and performances, although the rental cost is heavily subsidized by Fourth Presbyterian Church.

On the revenue side, registration fee income is very low, as singers with dementia and their care partners are asked to pay for only one person. There is also a scholarship program for those who cannot pay the full amount, and volunteers and guest singers are not asked to pay at all. By contrast, individual contributions, including those from major donors, are high. All told, Good Memories brings in almost three-quarters of the contributed income to the organization, while the Sounds Good choirs bring in most of the earned income.

## Evaluation

Good Memories staff regularly seek input at the end of each session from its participants. It is always working to expand its efforts to learn more about the choir experience, especially for singers with dementia and for care partners. The interviews conducted for this case study were welcomed by choir members who were thoughtful about both their appreciation of the choir and suggestions for improvement. Some of their recommendations are already being addressed. Going forward, these conversations should be built into the regular operations of the choir, at appropriate intervals.

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**“Good Memories is well run. It feels very professional. It starts on time and the conductor follows his plan to work on all the music by the end of the session.”**

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As part of its commitment to scientific research (see below), Good Memories continues to seek metrics to more specifically and quantifiably measure the outcomes of choir participation.

## Scientific Research

Good Memories is based on an increasing body of research that shows that music improves cognitive function and lessens long-term anxiety and depression in people with dementia, along with improving quality of life. People with dementia, it has been found, appear to perform well as singers despite memory loss and cognitive decline as they retain the ability to perceive pitch and melody.<sup>6</sup> Choral singing has been associated with improvements in cognitive function, increased energy, reduced stress and anxiety, and fewer depressive symptoms.<sup>7</sup> The research provides confidence that the Good Memories program is an effective tool for improving the wellbeing of people with dementia.

In addition, the Sounds Good Choir organization, through both of its choral programs, seeks to contribute to research on aging, dementia, and choral singing. Working with a team at Northwestern University, it has completed one study<sup>8</sup> on the impact of the online choir experience for seniors during the Covid pandemic and a second study is nearing publication. Good Memories Program and Research Director, Dr. Sandy Siegel Miller, believes it is important to conduct research both to contribute knowledge to the field and to have a voice in pressing for clinical advances and increased financial resources. For example, past research led to doctors in the UK being allowed to prescribe choral singing for their patients with dementia. Good Memories would like to be part of a successful movement for “social prescribing” of choral singing in the US.

## Conclusion

Good Memories has achieved an extraordinarily high level of satisfaction among its members and great respect from financial supporters and dementia-serving professionals. What is the special sauce that results

<sup>6</sup>Sixsmith and Gibson, *Ageing & Society*, Volume 27, Issue 1, January 2007, pp. 127–145

<sup>7</sup>Several studies are cited in Andre P. Smith 2022. See footnote 5.

<sup>8</sup>Bonakdarpour et.al., *Journal of Alzheimer's Research*, 2025.

in such satisfaction? What accounts for the feeling in the room, both during rehearsals and performances, that brings people back week after week and year after year? After conducting this case study process, it is still difficult to pin down, but I believe that it lies in the combination of the following factors:

**FIRST**, choral singing feels good and makes everyone in the choir happy. They breathe deeply and work together to create an artistic outcome. It has scientifically documented value for people with dementia, who sometimes can continue to express emotions through music, even as their memories fail.

**SECOND**, the two co-founders bring enthusiasm and strong personal commitments to Good Memories. They are warm, enthusiastic, and interested in the people in the room, regardless of their neurological status or whether they are paid or unpaid care partners. They appear to want to be there with the people in the choir. Their values infuse all aspects of the choir's work, including the conducting. Their genuine welcome and acceptance of the people in the room is mirrored back to them, and infects everyone else, resulting in an atmosphere of good will that creates a strong, positive experience for all the choir members.<sup>9</sup>

**THIRD**, the quality of the choral experience and outcome is very high, due to the professionalism and experience of the conductor and the accompanist.

**FOURTH**, there is a clear, specific investment in the details of building culture and community. Good Memories not only holds strong values about how people are treated but integrates them into the day-to-day life of the choir. Choir members all point to the snack breaks during each practice that enable people to get to know each other. Some notice that there is no talk of dementia; people with dementia blend into the group of singers. No one feels like a client. Choir members pick up the values of care for each other as human beings, which is demonstrated, without needing to be expressed.

**FIFTH**, the physical environment is bright and comfortable. Fourth Presbyterian Church has provided a friendly environment to both rehearse and perform. Church staff contribute to the welcome choir members feel when they enter the building.

<sup>9</sup>This may sound like an argument that only these two individuals can successfully lead a dementia choir. However, they themselves were inspired by their visit and subsequent conversations with the leaders of the Giving Voice dementia choir, two different people who came to their work with quite different backgrounds.



THE GOOD MEMORIES CHOIR EXPERIENCE

## The Performance

At the end of the session, the members of the Choir gather in the Buchanan Chapel at Fourth Presbyterian Church for a final run-through of their concert. They are dressed in dark pants and white shirts and wear purple scarves. Suddenly, they look almost professional! Everyone finds their singing buddies and their seats in a new place.

They run through the whole program, getting used to the resonant sound of the room. Those who will speak about their experiences in the choir figure out the best route from their chair to the microphone and are admonished by their friends to speak more loudly and slowly. The conductor reminds everyone of the signals to stand up and sit down, and how to bow together. After the run-through, everyone goes back to the rehearsal room for snacks and a break. When they come back down, there is an audience!

**“I go home and sing around the house.”**

Choir members smile and wave to their friends and family members and do their best to remember all the music they learned. They sing with enthusiasm and familiarity with the music. They applaud the stories of

their friends in the choir and enjoy the conductor's anecdotes about the music. They appreciate the program director's story of the choir, which is now their story too. At the end, there are hugs and tears from audience members and everyone in the choir says goodbye to each other until the next session begins.

## CASE STUDY

### Methodology

This project was intended to be a case study of the Good Memories choir as of March 2026. This case study is an analytical, evaluative, and transparent description of the choir at a moment in time. It reflects what participants—singers, care partners, volunteers, music staff, and administrative staff—report as the importance and value of the whole choir experience and its parts.

Beginning in early February, 25 interviews were conducted by the author of singers, care partners, volunteers, guest singers, music staff, administrative staff, social service providers expert in dementia, and financial supporters. Four follow-up interviews were conducted. Since it was difficult to interview singers with memory loss on video conferencing or telephone, four brief additional conversations were held before choir practice and during the break. One category of participants, paid caregivers, is underrepresented. (It should be noted that the author is a family care partner member of the Good Memories choir.)

In addition, documents were reviewed that included early communications about the Good Memories program, speeches by the co-founders, the Sounds Good Choir strategic plan, reports to the Board of Directors, and budget documents. The author also attended meetings of the Good Memories Research Committee, one of Sounds Good Choir's board-led committees.

## About the Author

Elspeth Revere is the founder and CEO of Ravenswood Consulting, where she advises donors and nonprofits on effective philanthropy, strategic planning, and nonprofit management. Elspeth has recently



*Elspeth Revere, Ravenswood Consulting.*

focused on the role of the nonprofit interim executive where she advised Board leadership and staff on strengthening nonprofits during times of transition.

She has worked as interim executive director with the Center for Neighborhood Technology, Evanston Community Foundation, the Chicago Cultural Alliance, Facets Multimedia, and Kartemquin Films.

In 2015, Elspeth retired from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, where she worked for 25 years. As Vice President of Media, Culture, and Special Initiatives, her responsibilities included

national support for journalism and media and Chicago support for the arts, as well as designing and implementing a changing set of special grantmaking initiatives on topics ranging from human rights to copyright to strengthening U.S. democracy.

Prior to joining the Foundation, Elspeth was President and CEO of the Woodstock Institute, a nonprofit policy research organization working to increase private sector investment in low-income neighborhoods, Director of Program Development for the city of Chicago's Department of Housing, and Senior Planner in the Department of Development and Planning. She also worked on community development projects in Guatemala.

Ms. Revere holds a master's degree in urban policy and planning from the University of Illinois at Chicago and a bachelor's degree in anthropology from the University of Chicago. She is a fellow of Leadership Greater Chicago. She is a care partner member of the Good Memories Choir.