

Hurricane Choir

Mental Health Project

Newsletter Issue #1 - March 2006



The Hurricane Choir

Martin Meader, international choral director, as well as Co-Executive Producer and Co-Writer of the Fox movie, *Paradise Road*, which starred Glenn Close and Cate Blanchett, has recently been in Baton Rouge and New Orleans, to oversee and direct the Hurricane Choir Project. This project will bring together over 1000 survivors of the Hurricane Katrina and Rita disasters. Their 12 week rehearsal period will culminate in three public performances across Louisiana in June 2006.

Sentiens and the University of Western Australia are involved in this project to pilot new ways of providing mental health assistance to people in need.

Mental Health

Mental health is not only associated with biological, psychological and social issues; there is also an important spiritual dimension. This project has many unique elements that will further our understanding of helping people and promoting mental health world-wide.

The Hurricane Choir has begun

Tonight we had our first rehearsal in Baton Rouge, Catholic Life Centre. We aim to do one rehearsal per day starting next Monday. Areas that we will cover are Baton Rouge, New Orleans, Hammond, Lafayette and the Renaissance Village where FEMA has housed 1500 families in temporary portable housing.

There are many people here who have suffered enormous trauma. One lady at rehearsal tonight was a nurse who worked in the New Orleans hospital when the hurricanes came in. She had to rescue babies. Some of her colleagues (doctors and nurses) were trapped in the hospitals for days, trying to save people's lives.

Louisiana is a very strong spiritual centre and this woman just prayed that she would be safe and eventually she and many of her colleagues were flown out by helicopters. The interesting point about her story is that there are many people who have amazing stories and who have suffered. From a mental health perspective, there is a lot of work to be done.

Tomorrow, we are off to see one of our colleagues in New Orleans - he will operate the camera for us. On the morning of Hurricane Katrina, he left for work and knew that he would never be able to go back to his home. And then he had to go and film other people who had lost everything - just like him. Singing is a very good therapy and as the word spreads I expect thousands of people to come and sing with us.



Mr Martin Meader
(Producer and Choir Director)
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Mental Health Groups Partner with the Choir

The Mental Health Association in Louisiana (MHAL) has joined forces with Meader's Hurricane Choir to assist in a groundbreaking study to monitor the results of group singing on people's thoughts and feelings. According to Yakima K. Black, Executive Director of MHAL, "The Hurricane Choir Project will not only promote mental health through singing, but will unite communities in an effort to bring forth social cohesion. Policy makers must look to establishing community partnerships in order to meet the growing mental health needs of our state. We can no longer afford to provide healthcare in silos. Community collaboration is imperative!"

Ms Yakima Black
(Executive Director of MHAL)
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Future Implications for Mental Health Promotion

"The project has implications for the management of the elderly, those who have not achieved full literacy and indigenous populations. This project has massive worldwide implications for the management of disorders (including Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, Depression and Anxiety). Interventions of this kind can supplement traditional health care delivery, and also allow high volume involvement of whole communities in projects of hope and spiritual sustenance."

Dennis Tannenbaum (Sentiens Consultant Psychiatrist and Executive Chairman)



Project Leadership

Let me introduce myself in benchmarks.

At the age of three years old, I began singing.

By the age of six, I had my own radio show in Clarksdale, Mississippi

At the age of 13, I began pursuing mental health issues, and became the marriage counselor all through High School.

By the age of 17, I was directing choirs.

By the age of 37, I had a doctorate in Counseling.

And by 45, I had released a cd of original compositions.

Two seemingly distinct tracks that would merge as a result of unprecedented tragedy.

Let no one say that the phoenix will not rise from the ashes – or in this case, from the flood waters and destruction.

While in no way wanting to display gratitude for the devastation around me, I am convinced that our task on this earth is not to ask *why*, but rather, *what we can do to respond?*

Respond we did.

In early January I met Martin Meader at the Holiday Inn South, where nearly a hundred people from all walks of life, including those who are displaced, gathered to sing. I was astounded by his ability to enhance the self-esteem of even the poorest of singers – and draw forth a harmonic sound majestic yet soulful.

Less than three months later, the magnetic force of Meader has joined

with the University of Western Australia, Sentiens and the Abraham Group, leading us in a project that will no doubt have international ramifications - the Hurricane Choir Project.

As US Research Project Coordinator, I am now in a most privileged seat. Not only do I get to sing in the tenor section (assisting as a base or alto as needed!) and listen as the choir performs a song I composed. I will also get to be the *on the ground* chief officer of a research study that will begin to answer with data - *does choral singing have a positive effect on mental health?*

And all of this work will be done via email and the internet through an incredible system created by Sentiens.

It has been a unique privilege to work closely with Dr Robin Harvey and Michael Fieldhouse from Sentiens and I hope that our relationship will only expand over the years.

Dr Nick Abraham
(US Research Coordinator)

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Research Report

A program of research is an integral part of the ambitious 1000 voice Hurricane Choir Project. The project will track the mental health of hurricane survivors who participate in the choir with changes in levels of anxiety, depression and post traumatic stress monitored via the internet over the 12 weeks of the choir project and beyond.

The research is ready to go with ethics approval given by the University of Western Australia. Sentiens Research and

Development Manager, Dr Robin Harvey spent last week in Baton Rouge with US Research Coordinator Dr Nicholas Abraham ensuring that the rigorous research protocols are in place.

The research team met with State Senator Broome and a representative of the US Congressman Baker to ensure State and Federal officials in the US are fully informed about the unique research project about to be undertaken in Baton Rouge. Dr Abraham and Dr Harvey received a favorable reception about the research strategy from Yakima Black, Executive Director of the Mental Health Association in Louisiana who was keen that an evidence-based approach was being used to measure how the choir experience will impact on mental health. Training of volunteers to support participants who are unfamiliar with computers has begun and consent of participants from the inaugural choir rehearsal has been obtained. The first enrolments of participants on the internet platform set up especially for the research project is anticipated in the next few days.

Dr Robin Harvey (Research and Development Manager, Sentiens)

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Nick, Robin and Yakima

Sentiens is an Australian disease management company that specialises in mental health care and chronic disease management. We provide systems to improve health care through monitoring, education and therapy. Our aim is to enhance the capacity for communication between clinicians and health services using information technology.

We became involved with The Hurricane Choir Project by invitation, to undertake a very unique intervention - the assessment and monitoring of the choir members.

This project has great value to many people in that volunteers assist choir members to undertake mental health assessments and monitoring.

Sentiens

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