

Voices of the Community

By Suzanne Jordan

The day finished with hugs and applause and the choir director's proclamation: "You can sing now!" Approximately 100 people spent the whole day singing on Oct. 2, the first of two choral workshops directed by Australian musician and filmmaker Martin Meader. The workshop was aimed at people who felt they couldn't

or were told they shouldn't sing. It was an opportunity for them to let go of their fears and become part of a community in song.

"People come in a bit intimidated," said Meader. "People are shy and nervous. We are human.

"But, he explained, people transform as the day progresses."

Ask anyone who sings seriously.

"Everyone gets the high from singing. It releases a lot of endorphins," he said.

"They're dragged in and come out singing."

Meader's passion for community singing was inspired by the story of a group of European women held in a Japanese prisoner of war camp in the early 1940's who managed to form a choir to remain sane, despite opposition from the guards. It's the same story that moved him to make the 1997 film *Paradise Road*, starring Glenn Close. Meader's inspiration has taken him around the world leading singing workshops, but this

was the first time he has offered one in Ottawa. Jean Versteeg was responsible for bringing Meader. She attended one of his workshops in another city, and it changed her life.

"We sang all the way home." She wanted Meader to give the experience to her friends. "I was selfish," she said.

"I wanted my friends to do it." Packed into a small conference hall at the Cartier Place Hotel on Cooper Street, there wasn't much room to get up and dance, but Meader encouraged the group to move with the music. Snapping their fingers and tapping their toes, they swayed to the sound of their own voices joined in harmony. Centretown resident Barclay McMillan was one of them. Unlike many of those at the workshop, McMillan has extensive musical training. He directs workshops, but even with his musical background, McMillan said he enjoyed Meader's unique style.



"(Meader) did a wonderful job. It's wonderful to be stimulated by someone else's approach," he said.

Versteeg said she was pleased with how the day turned out.

Leaning forward and clutching her chest she said: "What I got today was the love in this room."

Centretown News - Ottawa October 15th 1999