

The Accidental Director

Jennifer Grundulis



If you would have told me when I was 15 that I was going to be living in Ireland and directing a choir for People with Parkinson's, I would have thought you mad. Sure, I knew by then that I wanted to be a speech therapist (my grandmother solidified that desire in me after I spent two summers in Cape Cod with her and my grandfather, who had suffered a severe stroke. I was inundated by Speech Therapist facts until she won me over). And sure, Ireland seemed really cool... all us Yanks have a Celtic fascination. I had even done my 10th grade social studies project on Ireland. I also knew music would always be a part of my life, seeing as my childhood ambition was Broadway. But directing a CHOIR? For people with PARKINSON'S? IN Ireland?

Flash forward 20 years and that is exactly what I am doing, and I'm exactly where I'm meant to be. The Move 4 Parkinson's Voices of Hope Choir has been a labour of love not only for CEO Mags Mullarney, but for me as well. I have the privilege of spending two hours each week with a group of singers, from all walks of life, who come together for a joint purpose; to improve and enhance their lives through song.

I remember, for me, the moment the Voices of Hope Choir was born. Mags had asked me if I would give a talk at the Move 4 Parkinson's Empowerment Day in June 2012 on singing and Parkinson's. She knew I was a speech and language therapist who already directed a gospel choir, so for her, I was the perfect choice. I did some research on choral singing for PwP and came up with a plan that involved teaching a song to the attendees. Why TALK about singing when you can actually SING??

In order to actually sing, though, we were going to need singers to help me make my point. So Mags and I held a call to arms and assembled a small group of singers, some with Parkinson's and some without. These ladies rehearsed with me, moved with me and tolerated my, well, eccentric (some of my choir members might call it 'nuts') directing style. For our song, Something Inside So Strong (SISS) was chosen, not only for its upbeat, gospel feel, but for the meaning behind the lyrics.

The day arrived. My 'choristers' and I warmed up and waited in the wings. I was introduced and began my presentation. Being a novice in the Parkinson's world, I was nervous and wanted to come across sounding professional, intelligent and knowledgeable. It's funny, but I don't remember much from the presentation portion of my time up on that podium. But I remember the singing, and it'll never be forgotten. Once I invited my singers to join me, we started teaching SISS and the movements we had made up. We got everyone on their feet and had the crowd practice moving their feet and clapping to the beat. And then we sang. We sang our hearts out (and by 'we,' I mean everyone at the Aviva stadium that day).



Watch the video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=VaP1rcAA5JY#!

Buy the single: <https://itunes.apple.com/ie/album/something-inside-so-strong/id632094580?i=632094830&ign-mpt=uo%3D4>

By the end of the song, everyone was full voice, moving and clapping to the song. The Voices of Hope Choir was born on the very ending note of that song. On that last note, the attendees and singers all began to clap and cheer, and I heard myself saying, "let's do it again!"

The sequel to the story is still unfolding. The Move 4 Parkinson's Voices of Hope Choir was officially established in September 2012 and opened its doors and arms to anyone with Parkinson's, their family and friends, no singing ability necessary! We do not believe that one should have to fight PD on their own, so why join a choir on your own? We have been busy this past half a year and already have a concert, performing for the Irish president and 'singing for our supper' carolling all over Dublin under our belt. Our next project is a charity single of, you guessed it, *Something Inside So Strong*, which was launched on iTunes for World Parkinson's Awareness Day this 11 April! We are determined to raise spirits at the Parkinson's World Congress this October and our recording of SISS will help get us there! With the support of talented artists and Eurovision superstars Niamh Kavanagh and Shay Healy, we are sure to get our voices heard.

While the jury is still out on the physiological effects of choral singing for PwP, the anecdotal evidence for improving quality of life is so compelling. One of my singers sums it up quite nicely, "(The Voices of) Hope choir has shown me that there are no limits. Thursday is my oasis. Move 4 Parkinson's has got me living again and provided lots of practical support with love and kindness. Thanks to all. This is world changing for all of us and more."

I do urge you, if you have PD and you love music, consider joining a choir. Get out there and raise your voice!

*Jennifer is an American speech and language pathologist living in Dublin, Ireland. She is the proud director of A Glór Gospel and the Voices of Hope Choir and the even prouder mum to Jacob and Josie. You can follow the Voices of Hope choira at www.facebook.com/M4PVoices