

When Violence and Death Touch a Children's Choir

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This is a story about community and of a choir director who nurtures that community. This is a story about a boy who, through a love of music, found himself and his place in that community and who, through a tragic, senseless act, was torn away from it. It is a story about how the community came together through music to carry on in the face of his loss.

This paper has two parallel components—one a storied prose account, the other a presentation of elements of the story compressed into six-word reflections to underscore or in some cases to expand on the narrative. I gathered data through means of serial interviews with the choir director and review of related media accounts and literature on gun violence and the death of children in America (Rubenstein, Levine, and Hennekens 2019), and I shared draft manuscripts with the choir director for her review, suggestions, and approval. To protect anonymity, I use pseudonyms throughout.

THE KILLING

Affordable and lightweight It kills efficiently

Debbie shot me I love you

Due to its size, the 9-millimeter handgun, now one of the most popular self-defense calibers for concealed and open carry in the United States, is a weapon that provides good balance between ease of firing and stopping power. It is a lightweight pistol that has moderate recoil with less chance of over penetration. Ammunition can be found nearly everywhere and comes in a variety of

configurations—FMJ (full metal jacket), hollow point, and frangible (Higgins et al. 2020).

Affordable, compact, and reliable, a 9-millimeter pistol is also intended to kill. And it did kill. On a cold and snowy Sunday evening in a small, upper Midwest American town, this most popular of defensive weapons turned lethal. The woman pulling the trigger was a 32-year-old mother of two. Her victim, Joel Thomas, was 15, shot in the upper chest and throat, dying in a pool of blood in his father's arms, whispering, "Debbie shot me. I was trying to give her a hug... I love you."—while the shooter's two eight-year-old children looked on.

THE BOY

Big gentle boy He loved music
He just wanted To love people

Joel Thomas loved music. He sang in the high school choir. He played in the orchestra. He took part in summer music programs, and for six years he was a constant and joyful presence in the city children's choir. He was a big, gentle boy, a child of divorce, who had difficulty focusing, especially when his meds wore off; he needed attention, sought approval and affection and was anxious to please as he tried to belong. His body grew ahead of the rest of him; he was physically but not socially mature, with a voice changing early and an ear slow to catch up.

Following his older brother and sister into the children's choir had not been an option. In Joel's family, singing in the city choir was what you *did*, and you were expected not only to participate, you were expected to be a leader. Beyond that, in his family, whatever Mrs. Simpson, the choir's founding director, said, goes; without question, it goes.

THE CITY CHILDREN'S CHOIR

Bridging diversity Building community through music
Differences aside We do something wonderful
Emotions shared And embraced through singing
Struggle accomplishment purpose We come together
Music the glue that binds us

That year, the city children's choir was in its 19th season. With over 230 singers, five conductors, five collaborative pianists, directors for general management, finance, and social media, as well as a 16-member advisory board, it was a thriving, dynamic part of the cultural life of the area. The City Children's Choir organization included three treble choirs for children in grades three through six and a fourth "primo" mixed-voice choir, led by Mrs. Simpson, for children in grades seven through nine. Students in the tenth through twelfth grades who wished to maintain a connection to the organization were encouraged to volunteer their time and talents as mentors. They concurrently received training in leadership, personal development, and musical teaching techniques. There are musical goals, but participation in the choir is also about building community despite differences, learning how to work together on a common goal. Looking at pictures of the choir, especially the informal ones, it is clear that the children enjoy it, lending credence to Mrs. Simpson's assertion that she doesn't have to put the smiles on their faces. "That's how they feel together," she says.

THE CHALLENGE OF BOYS CHANGING VOICES

Squeaky squawky cracky Changing voices challenge

Mouth shut Won't sing another note

Responsible risks to Keep boys trying

Take a chance I'll help you

Beyond the forest Of tone deafness

We have been through War together

They emerge Singing like nobody's business

Joel Thomas had been a part of the city choir organization for six years, and for four of those he had been a member of the primo chorus, his early changing voice leading Mrs. Simpson to grant him special, early admission to the group. Mrs. Simpson had spent many years as a middle school choir teacher and had helped many a boy to navigate that most difficult time when his voice changes. She understood the importance of creating a safe, respectful space where the boys could take what she called "responsible risks," praising their successes, looking past their failures, and giving them the courage to keep singing—because she knew that if they did, they would emerge "singing like nobody's business."

In the beginning, Joel had been a challenge, not just because of his changing voice and his trouble matching pitch in an unaccustomed register, but also because he had difficulty keeping focused; he was frequently off-task and sought attention from others. That is how he came to have his regular seat, front and center, closest to Mrs. Simpson, where she could help him with both pitch and behavior. Still, he wanted to do well and was anxious for Mrs. Simpson's approval. She never gave up on him, and he seemed to sense that. After rehearsal, Joel would ask, "Did I do all right today?" Often the last to leave, he would turn toward her before going out the door, with a smile on his face, and say, "Thank you, Mrs. Simpson."

THE BREAKTHROUGH

Off task Off pitch Seeking attention

Did I do all right today?

Wonderful so wonderful Good tears flow

Smiling face At last! At last!

"Bye Joel" Thank you Mrs. Simpson

Music education students from the nearby university assisted the choirs, and Mrs. Simpson thought that it would be beneficial for Joel if he could work with one of the male university students who could model the music in the proper register, sing along with him, and show what a wonderful thing a boy's voice could become if he kept on singing. And so, when Joel was, as Mrs. Simpson described it, about "three quarters of the way out of his tone deafness, but still not quite accurate," she introduced him to Tom Roberts. She said, "Tom, this boy really needs some guidance. He's got this big body. He's got this big voice. And neither one of them are working in tandem. And the ear is out in left field. [pause] It's in your hands if you want to give it a try." Tom took up the challenge, and he and Joel really made a connection. After Tom graduated from the university and was no longer working with the choir, Joel's mother sent him to take private voice lessons with Tom.

Mrs. Simpson really did not know how the voice lessons were going. All Tom would say when she asked was, "Oh, he's coming along." When it came time to audition for solos at the annual Strawberry Social fundraiser, Joel's name was on the list. He'd been eligible for the last three years, but he had never managed to do it. Mrs. Simpson thought, "I hope that Tom has him ready. Surely, he would not let Joel audition if he wasn't prepared," and it was with some trepidation that Mrs.

Simpson, at the audition, sitting outside of Joel's line of vision, heard what he had accomplished. It was wonderful, so wonderful that tears started to stream down her face. As soon as he cut off, Joel turned and looked at Mrs. Simpson, and of course, he saw the tears. She said, "Good tears, Joel, good tears. You have never sounded better." And then, the smile on his face said better than words ever could, "At last!" He had the affirmation that he had been waiting for all that time from Mrs. Simpson. "At last!"

The weekly Thursday rehearsals for the Strawberry Social continued. Solos were polished, stage presence practiced. She had been hard on Joel, demanding, because she recognized the promise in his voice, what he could do. After this rehearsal, there was just one more to go, and then, the long-awaited show day would be here. At the end of the evening, with much to discuss, Mrs. Simpson was meeting with some of the staff at the piano. Joel, as always looking for her approval and among the last to leave, had put his coat on. And just as she started to say something to the staff, he turned around at the door as if to speak to her, so she said, "Bye Joel." "Thank you, Mrs. Simpson," and smiling, he walked out the door.

THE PHONE CALL

Joel was shot He is gone

Why why why did this happen?

At home on the following Sunday evening, with the Strawberry Social now only six days away, Mrs. Simpson's phone rang. It was late—about 9:30. She wondered, "Who that could be calling at this hour?" "Hello?"

"Oh, Mrs. Simpson, this is Joel's grandmother."

"Well, hello. How are you?"

The reply, "Joel has been shot." There was no easing in, no softening. "Joel has been shot."

"What?"

"Joel was with his dad at his dad's girlfriend's house. And Joel was shot. About 6:30. Joel was shot."

"My goodness. How is he?"

The grandmother's reply, "He's gone."

And Mrs. Simpson couldn't wrap her head around it. She knew Joel's grandmother wasn't joking, but she thought, "I just need to wake up. This must be a bad dream."

But his grandmother continued. “Linda (Joel’s mother) wanted me to call you because she knew you would want to know right away.”

Mrs. Simpson knew the family well, but she was not family. It had happened only three hours earlier, yet the family had thought to call her. “How, how, how did this happen?” she asked.

The answer, “The woman shot him.” It was a bald statement with no explanation, nothing, just — “the woman shot him.”

Still in denial, still holding the phone, Mrs. Simpson thought, “No, this kind of violent death only comes when you are involved with shady people. In our little Americana world here, this doesn’t happen to a kind person. Not to a kind person like Joel.” Then she thought about next Saturday’s Strawberry Social and Joel’s part in it, how excited he was about his solo. He was sounding great and getting so many compliments that she had worried about creating a monster of a big head. Now, she thought, “He’s not going to sing his solo. He’s not going to get that moment he has waited for, for so long. Why, why, why did this happen?” And then, she went from shock to anger. Joel was a big kid, but he was such a gentle kid. He didn’t have a mean bone in his body. This was not right.

And then on the phone, Joel’s grandmother continued, “Linda also wanted you to know because she’d like for the children’s choir to sing at the funeral.”

At those words, the choir director part of Mrs. Simpson kicked in. No time to process. No time to grieve. There were things to do. She had to tell the other choir directors. She had to think about music. What would they sing? Could the children sing under these circumstances? She had to think about a host of other things. Could they get time off school? Where would they sit at the funeral? Even mundane things like where would they put their coats? Sometime during the course of that terrible, short, long week, the Strawberry Social fundraiser for the choir was changed to a fundraiser for Joel’s family. That meant talking to media people so the event could be promoted. There was rehearsal on Thursday, the funeral was on Friday, the fundraiser on Saturday. What would she say to the children? Would they come to the rehearsal? Would their parents let them come?

THE REHEARSAL

In trouble, look to your helpers
I'm mad, hurt. I don't understand
Past, present, passed. For now, farewell
Song of community. Community of song.

Mr. Rogers, the TV personality, always said, “In times of trouble, look to your helpers.” And thinking of Mr. Rogers, Mrs. Simpson did just that. A parent of one of the choir children was a counselor at Joel’s high school. She called him and he said, “You’ll need a crisis team at the rehearsal. Let me handle that.” Normally, the beginning of rehearsal is buzzing with banter. They’re middle schoolers and it’s loud. This rehearsal was different. As the students came in, they said nothing. Some hovered in the hall, apprehensive about coming in the door. A few of the students started to tear up when they saw each other. Some parents emailed concern about sending their children at all.

Rehearsal usually began with an echo clapping hand pattern to focus attention, but Mrs. Simpson simply raised her hand and the room fell silent. She said, “I’m mad, I’m hurt. I don’t understand. And I’m 61 years old, and I don’t get all of this. So, I’ve called someone that I trust who can help me sort out why I’m feeling what I’m feeling, because I want to get through the emotion enough so that I can really focus on what needs to happen. And that is honoring Joel’s life. But right now, I don’t even know what to say. How do we grieve? What is okay and how do we move forward after we have grieved? And what role is music going to play in helping us do that? I don’t know how to proceed. I just know I feel lots of things. And if you feel those things too, let’s talk to someone who can help us sort it out.”

Then the counselor spoke to the choir and introduced the crisis team. He told the choir that we have to acknowledge that what we feel is real, but that eventually we would get to the point where we could celebrate and honor Joel. Mrs. Simpson asked, “Is it okay for us to sing?” He responded with, “Would Joel want you to sing?” “Well, of course, he would! He would not want it to be Thursday night without you singing.” He then told everyone that they could come and meet with him or one of the other counselors, who would be available right outside the rehearsal room, if they would like to do that. Then, the counselors all stepped outside the door and let the choir have their moment together without strangers in the room.

Mrs. Simpson asked the children, “What do you think we should sing?” And they said, “Here’s to Song” (MacGillivray 2006), which is the choir’s theme song.

They'd all sung it a hundred times and they knew the words by heart. It is a song of community—those past, those present, and those passed away. “Till our paths in future cross, may blessings kindly greet you. Until the time I must alas only in memory meet you. But often I will sit and stare and think upon this evening. Rare, the company beyond compare. For now, farewell.” After that, the children just bawled, weeping together in a shared expression of loss. They held on to each other. They put their arms around each other. And they got through. In Mrs. Simpson's words, “We cried our way through it. But after we did that, we were able to take a deep breath and go through the rehearsal.” That included the funeral music, which was practiced just by the 25 children who said they would participate in the funeral, but also there were some fun songs for the Strawberry Social, rehearsed by everyone. By the end of the rehearsal, they were laughing together again and in that moment of community, they were empowered.

THE FUNERAL

Music was a hope for healing
To move forward in our lives

One after another, children came up to Mrs. Simpson, asking, “I didn't tell you I was going to sing at the funeral, but is it okay if I do?” Even more of them showed up at the church. Mrs. Simpson had to find more music. They'd set up chairs for 30 and by the time the funeral took place, there were 60 in the choir. They had to bring in more chairs, adding and squeezing singers in where they could. It was a beautiful thing. And they sang beautifully, too. The music was an integral part of that funeral, and in Mrs. Simpson's words, in that music there was “a hope for healing” and a way to “move forward in our lives.”

THE FUNDRAISER CONCERT

Fighting emotion. Tom sang for Joel
A hug, a big long hug
Like she was hugging her son

The very next day was the Strawberry Social. All morning the students came in, working on their solos or duets, practicing them on stage with the spotlight, the microphone. Then in the evening, about an hour-and-a-half before curtain, there was dress rehearsal for the whole choir to work on the group numbers. Mrs.

Simpson told them that the performance had been changed to a fundraiser for Joel's family and that Tom Roberts would be singing Joel's solo, but that since there was a good recording of Joel singing the piece, his mother had asked if the first part of that video could be played, and then Tom would finish it. Some of the students were a little teary seeing Joel on the screen, but when they heard Tom would carry on from there, they thought that was very cool, because they knew Tom and what a wonderful voice he had.

Almost \$10,000 was raised for the family at that concert, triple what they would normally make. Tom sang Joel's solo. It was difficult, especially so given the video of Joel singing that started it. Fighting back emotion, Tom's voice broke in the middle of the song, but he just knew he had to finish it out for Joel because that is what Joel would have wanted. And he did. He finished that song like crazy. Joel's mother came up to the stage, and when Tom jumped down to greet her, she gave him a hug—a big, long hug, almost like she was hugging Joel.

THE DIRECTOR

Responsibility, burden. Without time to grieve

Who was there for Mrs. Simpson?

It was a tough tough time

What words? What actions? What music?

Who helps music teachers manage grief?

The next day, the short, long week leading to that moment at the Strawberry Social was finally over, and Mrs. Simpson was hit with a wall of emotion. Putting one foot in front of the other seemed hard. She felt surrounded by darkness, fog, unable to see clearly. She had been there for her students. She had been there for the other choir personnel. She had been there for Joel's family. Who was there for Mrs. Simpson? It was a tough, tough time.

I do not know if there are lessons in this tragic story. I do know that, given the prevalence of gun violence in the U.S., other musical ensembles and their directors will face violent loss. To paraphrase Mrs. Simpson, how can music teachers get through the emotion enough to really focus on what needs to happen when death takes one of the children? What words, what actions and what music is appropriate? How do we grieve? How do we, can we, prepare music teachers for this?

About the Author

Katherine Norman Dearden is an Associate Professor and former Department Chair of the Department of Music at the University of North Dakota. Her research interests include narrative, historical and qualitative inquiry on issues such as diversity in music education, the challenge of music administration in a time of negativity toward the arts and their value, and interdisciplinary perspectives on the nature of learning in music and mathematics. She has published her work in several peer-reviewed music journals and presented papers at national and international venues, including six of the Narrative Inquiry in Music Education conferences. Dr. Norman Dearden's work has taken her across the world as a lecturer in both Brazil and China. She was for three years, an Associate Dean of the University of North Dakota's College of Arts and Sciences with responsibilities in curriculum and research.

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