

Hurricane Choir Mental Health Project

Newsletter Issue #2 - April 2006



Enhancing Resiliency

One of the most interesting concepts in this project is that being part of a resilient and positive community through singing can help people to *feel* better in times of tragedy.

It is amazing to see a true example of community development through social cohesion that involves so many people.

St. Thomas Aquinas

There was amazing support with a strong core of students attending the after school rehearsal. The teacher there is instrumental in supporting the choir and is setting up media contacts, has organised the venue for our weekly rehearsals, and is ensuring that the word gets out into the Hammond community.

Leon Stewart (*Sound*)

Words from State

Senator -

Sharon Weston Broome

I admire the vision of the leaders of the 1000 voice Hurricane Choir Project. I believe this project will have a tremendous impact on both survivors and the entire community of Baton Rouge. I also consider that the research attached to the project has international value. In my experience, there is a positive link between singing, mental health and well-being. I hope that tracking the mental health of the hurricane survivors through the choir experience can scientifically prove these links.



Hurricane Choir Team with Senator Sharon Weston Broome

After the devastation of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, I am encouraged as hope is being restored to the people of Louisiana through our musical heritage. I look forward to us rebuilding our communities as well as our mental health and social networks.

Sincerely,

Sharon Weston Broome
State Senator, District 15

The Hurricane Choir

This week has been a momentous week for the The Hurricane Choir Project. FEMA has given us permission to begin singing rehearsals in the temporary housing villages. This provides access to approximately 3,000 survivors.

We have also secured a satellite choir in a place called Hammond, approximately one hour from Baton Rouge and New Orleans. This choir is based around high school students who will not only sing in the choir, but will also organise the venue and the local population to sing as well. (There are many hurricane survivors in this region.)



We have also secured at least one venue in New Orleans in which to rehearse (a church that had at least two metres of water damage during the hurricane).

On Thursday night (March 23rd) we saw the Morgan State University Gospel Choir give a performance for Hurricane survivors in New Orleans. The performance was awesome and in one of the speeches during intermission, the preacher praised the survivors telling them that they are not just survivors but heroes of the hurricane.

Mr Martin Meader
(*Producer and Choir Director*)
Email: martinsings@gmail.com



The Depth of Community Resilience

"The Katrina tragedy has left the New Orleans community devastated by uprooting the foundations of the community through significant losses of life and possessions. But the soul of man has always been the indestructible resilient factor in the face of adversity. And in the joining of souls creating a message of love and acknowledging the spiritual component of humans, a profound message resonates over the globe: There is endless hope in the power of love. It is a privilege to be a witness of the healing of a community as music helps to restore unity amongst a fragmented community."

Dr Peter Classen (*Consultant Psychiatrist*)



Research Update

In a year of unprecedented disasters (e.g. the Boxing Day Tsunami), I remained shocked to see the disaster that struck Louisiana in August 2005. Immediately it was obvious that the choir was a project of great humanitarian value. In the past weeks I have devoted a great deal of time designing the research component of the project, doing my best to ensure it will be a successful and rewarding experience for the choir members.

In essence, the research required the development of a service delivery model that suited the strengths and abilities of the local communities who would be participating.

Integral to the project was the development of a streamlined, remote enrolment system, which combined basic data capture for identity creation with information delivery, ensuring choir members could provide informed consent. It needed to be as inclusive as possible by being accessible and easy, accommodating all literacy and computer skill levels. With this purpose in mind, a number of easy-to-read guides were developed that introduced choir members to the project and the tools they were to use. A small number of volunteers were also trained to provide additional assistance to those who required it.

We also sought to use the capabilities of RecoveryRoad and provide helpful mental health literacy brochures developed by the Department of Human and Health Services and the Department of Veterans' Affairs. This allowed a reciprocal relationship of information

exchange with choir members, rather than creating a situation in which we, the researchers, simply collected data.

The result is an inclusive system that can remotely enrol and monitor high volumes of people as well as provide them with useful skills, such as setting up and using email accounts, which will continue to be valuable long after the project has finished.



Michael Smith
(Research Officer - Sentiens)

Research Support

My involvement with the Hurricane Choir Project began last year, when Dr Pieter Claassen (Consultant Psychiatrist) approached me to discuss introducing a research component to this venture.

I was immediately struck by the philanthropic drive to this project. It seems to have started as a group of Aussies thinking creatively about survivors of natural disasters on the other side of the world - trying to bridge gaps of distance, culture, traditional service-delivery paradigms, and budgets to make a positive and sustained difference to the well-being of people they had never met.

My early meetings at cafés and offices

with Martin Meader, choristers, and the Sentiens group confirmed my initial impression of the sincerity and enthusiasm of this eclectic group, and also set some tight time frames to get the research component up and running. The Hurricane Choir Project has expanded greatly since then, although it continues to be characterised by volunteers using local skills to get things done.

Applying a research framework to measure the effectiveness of the Hurricane Choir Project from a mental health perspective, is an important step in both validating this intervention from a scientific perspective and also in continuing to improving what we do. My own research background is in Anxiety Disorder Research, having conducted clinical trials in Europe and Australia, and it is gratifying to be involved in naturalistic, population-targeted research such as this project, that offers original solutions to trauma recovery and prevention.

We look forward to reporting the first results from this novel and ambitious project to you in the near future.



Dr Sean Hood
(Consultant Psychiatrist & Senior Lecturer, UWA School of Psychiatry & Clinical Neurosciences)

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
PO Box 842, West Perth, 6872
Phone: +61 8 9481 1950
Email: info@sentiens.com
Online: www.sentiens.com

Project supporters:

