

ACCESSIBILITY AND ACCOMMODATION:
HOW ONE LOCAL ARTS ORGANIZATION
ADDRESSES THESE ISSUES FOR ITS
MEMBERS AND ITS AUDIENCE

by Timothy D. Brooks



"When I attended my first CGMC concert in December of 2022, I was happily surprised to see that at least a half dozen chorus members in the front

row were singing while seated, likely due to some sort of disability or mobility issue.

I watched them throughout the concert. While the singers behind them were singing and moving in unison, the seated members were all making music just as joyfully, but doing a slightly modified version of the choreography.

Watching that performance gave me the motivation and courage to audition for the group last August, as the Chorus began its' 2023-24 season. Because of my own mobility issues, (I suffer from severe arthritis in both knees) I was worried that it might not be possible for me to participate, since I had great difficulty walking even short distances, and could not sing a full concert while standing. But, I saw myself represented on that stage, and thought I wouldn't be "the only one" with some type of issue that might keep me from being able to perform. At my voicing session with Artistic Director, Jared Brayton Bollenbacher, my worries were further eased, when he told me that it would not be a problem for me to sing while seated at either rehearsals or performances.

"Having singers with different accessibility needs only brings more vibrancy to our

chorus. Finding ways to have more singers on the stage only enriches our chorus voice. We show that we are inclusive by finding ways for our singers to be present and engaged in the performance based on their needs," said Bollenbacher.

Once I officially became a member of the group, I faced the next challenge, which was getting to and from rehearsals. Each Sunday evening, the chorus meets in a lower-level rehearsal room of The Ohio Theatre, in downtown Columbus. My partner dropped me off at the theatre, after which I had to walk from the street to the back door entrance – a distance that was to me, equal to walking the length of a football field. Once inside, I took an elevator down to the next level, and then walked down a flight of stairs to arrive in the rehearsal hall. While this was something I could do, it was still a painful journey for me. I was able to break up that journey by stopping at several resting spots along the way. Once inside the hall, I found my seat in the Bass section – and there I sat for the next three hours, until rehearsal was over.

During the first few rehearsals, I looked around the room, and immediately noticed that I was one of several members who had some type of mobility issue. Some had crutches, one was in a wheelchair, and many, like me, remained seated throughout the rehearsal, when our director invited everyone who was able to stand and sing during various run-throughs.

I was not quick to broadcast to those around me why I was not standing with everyone else. However, I was immediately struck by how caring and understanding the members seated near me were – with several asking if I needed any help, or if I was doing okay. At those moments, it was easy for me to say, "I'm okay, but just not able to stand due to my bad knees." None of this should have

surprised me. During the first week as a member, I was given a copy of the CGMC Membership Handbook. On page 3, I found a statement about the organization's philosophy regarding Diversity, Equity and Inclusion.

"Equity. Access. Belonging. These are more than words for us. These are principles guiding how we recruit members, program performances, and create a culture that is the right fit for every member of CGMC. We provide outreach through song to diverse audiences, and we strive to reflect that diversity within our organization. We welcome all, and we empower all to be and express their full, authentic selves. Our CGMC family includes many different identities and experiences. These diverse perspectives strengthen our mission of raising our voices to uplift and celebrate our communities and change lives."

CGMC firmly supports equal opportunity for all. We do not and shall not discriminate based on race, color, religion, gender expression, gender identity, ethnicity, skill level, age, disability, marital status, HIV status, sexual orientation, mobility status, military status, employment status, or socioeconomic status in any of our functions or operations.

Diversity of experience and thought are strengths. We channel these strengths to fortify our organization and the LGBTQIA+ community through song and service. In selecting accessible venues and providing ASL interpreters for its concerts, CGMC endeavors to perform and entertain all people. We have created – and may yet create – other ensembles under the direction of the Artistic Staff that can perform, entertain, and provide outreach to new audiences.

CGMC strives for gender neutrality regarding language, recognizing the many genders

represented within our organization and the LGBTQIA+ community. We are committed to using gender-inclusive language that affirms and respects how people describe, express, and experience their gender. We encourage our members to learn each other's pronouns, and we honor each person's gender identity and expression. We also utilize gender-neutral options when addressing groups and singing sections. CGMC is committed to fostering an environment in which all members are comfortable expressing and being themselves."

As the weeks went by, I began to get acquainted with others in the group who had some type of issue that made participating in the group a challenge for them. I began to learn more about the diverse array of special accommodations that were needed, beyond those needed for those with just limited mobility.

My brief history with CGMC started nine months before becoming a singing member of the group. I began volunteering behind the scenes as a member of the 5th section in the early spring of 2023, when Donovan Jones invited me to become a member of the Communications and Development Committees. With the help of numerous collaborators and contributors, I began editing a new iteration of the CGMC newsletter – of which there have now been three quarterly issues (one last May, August and November.) Our next newsletter is due out in mid-late February 2024.

Based on my own mobility challenges and knowing that I wasn't the only one in the group who had "issues," I proposed an article for an upcoming issue of our newsletter, on the topic of accessibility. In particular, I thought it would be illuminating to talk to a cross-section of self-identified members of the group who have any one of a variety of issues (including physical,

mental, or emotional health-related) for which CGMC is or should be making some type of accommodation. My goal was to learn more about the obstacles other members had to face in order to be a contributing member of the chorus, and what (if any) special accommodation they've had to look for, request, or work around – in order to make it possible for them to sing with their fellow members.

Here are some of their responses:

ALEX McVAY is a member of the Tenor II section. He has been blind since birth, which he says brings him lots of challenges. He navigates his day-to-day life with the attitude of “you never know how hard something is going to be until you try” – and “just do the best you can.” A friend brought him to the concert in March 2023, after which he asked if it would be possible for him to join. Having sung in school choirs since he was in the 4th grade, Alex thought joining CGMC would be a fun way to get back into music.

He spoke with Brayton and Membership Director, Krystal Jackowiak, about his blindness, and they both said they were open to him using whatever devices he needed to learn the music. I first noticed him at rehearsal using a tablet-like device,

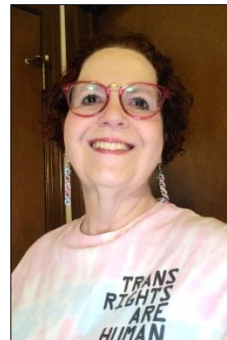


known as the BRAILLIANT BI 20X, which allows him to read the lyrics of the songs

being performed in braille. While seated amongst members of the Tenor II section, he learns the notes by listening to the others singing the Tenor II part. His first performance with the group was at the Walt's Vault concert in June, which went very well.

Alex was back at the start of the 2023-24 season and plans to sing and performed at

the Holiday Show, at OMEA, and will sing in the June concert. One challenge still requires special help – from friends and fellow chorus members, like his Chorus Buddy. Alex lives in Etna, about 20+ miles east of downtown Columbus. Since he doesn't drive, and there is not any public transportation option, he depends on getting rides to and from rehearsals and performances.



LYN HERRON has been a member of the Tenor I section since 2019. She is one of many CGMC members who have an “invisible” disability or issue that isn't readily apparent to the casual observer.

Lyn had been a season ticket holder since 2015, and always enjoyed going to the programs with her mom. At one performance in 2019, where the 50th anniversary of Stonewall was being celebrated, the CGMC Executive Director, during his remarks from the stage, said that the group was actively seeking new members representing all genders and orientations. LGBTQIA+ means that no member of the community should be left sitting off to the side. That was the encouragement she needed to join.

During the rehearsals in preparation for her first concert, Lyn was experiencing some dizziness and unsteadiness, caused by medications she was taking, which also left her very thirsty. She was having trouble performing while sitting in a chair and found it difficult to do the choreography. She was initially reluctant to share her worries with the Director, but when she did, both he and the Membership Director were immediately open to helping her do her best. They changed the type of chair she used on stage and modified the

choreography to make it easier. Their attitude from the beginning was “we’re going to help you get what you need to do your best!”

Lyn said she was never made to feel “less than” because of her issues. It’s now 2024, and those early troubles are over, but she’s still very appreciative of the prevailing attitude of acceptance and willingness to help among the members.



MIKE BOGGS is a baritone and has been a member of CGMC since 2020. He joined the group seeking a community with others who loved music. It was a weird time to join the group, due to

the unexpected shutdowns of practically everything, due to COVID-19. Based on the need for “social distancing”, he recalls that rehearsals were held in warehouses and parking garages, and performances were mostly outside, like the time they sang before a baseball game at Huntington Park.

Mike has a connective tissue disorder, known as Ehlers Danlos Syndrome, which affects his mobility, due to the dislocation of hips, knees or shoulders. In addition, he suffers from POTS (Postural Orthostatic Tachycardia Syndrome) which can throw his nervous system “out of whack” – resulting in a high heart rate. Standing and changes in position can result in him passing out. Living life to the fullest is important to Mike, as his prognosis for the future is uncertain, and he anticipates additional problems from these maladies. In the meantime, he gets around using various devices, including canes, crutches or wheelchairs.

His love of music grew while in high school, when he was in the chorus, and played

guitar, bass and piano. As a member of CGMC, Mike has enjoyed meeting his fellow singers and being in a group that stresses inclusivity. He has faced some accessibility challenges, related to chorus activities, outside the rehearsal hall or on stage. In June, the group had a float and marched in the Columbus Gay Pride Parade, and then performed on an outdoor stage in Goodale Park afterwards. In both cases, he was met with physical challenges which had no accessible solution. On another occasion, the group had an outing at the new Crew Stadium in the Arena District. Tickets were provided but the seats were located on the top row inside the stadium, with no disabled access. He isn’t always able to participate in group sponsored social activities, due to them being held in venues that are not always wheelchair friendly. Still, he advocates for greater accessibility through appropriate channels and joins in as many activities as he is able.



OLLIE WOODRUFF (whose pronouns are they/them) sings in the Upper Tenor I section and has been in the chorus since September 2019. They have been quite open and forthcoming with

their fellow members about the variety of physical, neurological, cognitive, and mental health issues they’re dealing with and the different accommodations needed at various times to help cope.

“The first thing you probably notice about me is that I have a dog. His name is Onyx (AKA Mr. Boy), and he is my service dog,” said Ollie. Onyx does both psychiatric and light mobility (balance) work related to their anxiety, fibromyalgia, and vasovagal syncope. Ollie is careful to remind her

fellow members that Onyx is doing a job and should not be petted, whether in the rehearsal room, or while performing on stage. Secondly, observers might notice Ollie coughing, aggressively blinking their eyes, making weird noises, or aggressively typing on their phone. These are all symptoms of Tourette's Syndrome, a neurological condition where the brain/nervous system kind of glitches.

"Third! I may be using different mobility devices depending on my pain levels, the situation, and what I have available to me," Ollie said. "Typically, I will start out with just Onyx coming to rehearsals with me, but as we get into the choreography, I will start using my wheelchair." Ollie uses a wheelchair for concerts (as well as sitting during practice) because it is difficult/unsafe for them to stand for long periods due to the pain I experience with fibromyalgia, and the dizziness they can experience with vasovagal syncope. While Ollie is able to stand and walk sometimes, there are certain scenarios, conditions or periods of time where it is not safe for them to do so.

Ollie's advice for new members of CGMC that are disabled, dealing with pain, dizziness, or other conditions that make performing difficult: "Please don't be afraid to advocate for yourself, ask for the accommodations that you need, or let your fellow chorus members know what your needs/restrictions are. If you're anxious about reaching out to the leadership about accommodations, talk to a chorus buddy, section leader, or anyone you feel comfortable with, and together, we can help make sure that your needs are met and the message gets to whoever it needs to reach."

As a way of preparing for our performances at one of the many concert venues used by CGMC, Executive Director, Donovan Jones,

will do an "Accessibility Assessment" – as described in this message he sent to members prior to the Holiday concert at the Riffe Center last fall:



"As is our new custom, we schedule a visit to our performing venues to look at backstage and audience experiences with regard to accessibility leading up to our shows. Since both the Vox and CGMC shows are at the Riffe Center in adjacent theaters, we will be doing a visit for both this Friday, October 13 at 5pm. If you are interested and cannot make it, please feel free to send an advocate on your behalf or set up a conversation with me in advance of the visit. This visit invitation is for those with and without accessibility needs who are willing to lend their eyes, expertise, and experience to help us communicate and deliver better for our members and audience. As a reminder, any accessibility needs on stage should be communicated directly to Brayton. Per the staff at Riffe, parking can be found closest on the street, or the Fifth/third Garage or Columbus Commons Underground garage. We will meet at the High Street entrance of the Riffe and will go through security before we head up to the Studios."

Ollie reminds fellow members that they should never feel like they are not "disabled enough" to need an accommodation. "Even if you think the accommodation is unconventional or weird, asking never hurts!"



GALE CALLAGHAN (whose pronouns are they/he/him) joined the Baritone section of the chorus in 2021, after hearing one of CGMC's concerts on the radio. He doesn't suffer from any major health problems but is Autistic. He is able to do most things independently but

says that he relies on his support network for things like grocery shopping or help with managing his finances.

Gale has always loved to sing but admits that he isn't great at reading music. He joined CGMC so that he could be a part of a music community, and says he is impressed with the technical proficiency of the singers in the group. His biggest challenge while performing on stage is keeping still. "I always bring a small toy, like a ring, on stage to help with this need to move," he said. Gale says Tours offered by Donovan before each performance. "I like to familiarize myself with the space in each new venue before we start rehearsing, to increase my comfort level" he said.

Encouraged by his parents to participate, Gale's first musical experience was singing in a Children's Chorus, which he did from age 5 through 11. As an adult, he's glad to have music back in his life. Like Ollie, he says that you need to be an advocate for your needs. "It can't be fixed, if nobody knows what you need!"

Another chorus member, who joined the group in the fall of 2022, shared this story with the request that they remain anonymous. Here are their words, exactly as written: "Having suffered for the last few years with acute anxiety, wicked panic

attacks and agoraphobia, I literally "Judy Garland'd" (i.e., drugged myself) to take a giant chance by auditioning for CGMC.

"Every week is difficult for me to walk out my door, but I consider our CGMC rehearsals as my weekly therapy. It's the safest place on Earth to become desensitized to larger crowds, noise, lights, smells, being outside the house, interfacing with public life, having conversations, trusting others, but all the while I'm completely safe. That is something traditional therapy just can't give you.

"Besides being a first-class music program with astounding talent and inclusive leadership, CGMC is a home base for healing. Healing through music, healing through shared experience, healing by just being present.

"I will be so bold to say it: There is not a single one of us in this group who hasn't had some sort of hurt, loss or trauma, and whether we realize it or not, each note, each stanza, each awful cut off and lingering "sssssss's" teaches us we can overcome obstacles, try again (and again) and achieve the goals! Where else can you get that? Each week we remind ourselves that when we raise our voices-not only do we change the lives of others, but more importantly-we significantly change our own."

THE ADA PROTECTS PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) is a federal civil rights law passed by Congress in 1990, that prohibits discrimination against people with disabilities in everyday activities. The ADA prohibits discrimination on the basis of disability just as other civil rights laws prohibit discrimination on the basis of race, color, sex, national origin, age, and religion.

The ADA guarantees that people with disabilities have the same opportunities as everyone else to enjoy employment opportunities, purchase goods and services, and participate in state and local government programs.

A person with a disability is someone who has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities. Or, a person who has a history or record of such an impairment (such as cancer that is in remission), or is perceived by others as having such an impairment (such as a person who has scars from a severe burn).

If a person falls into any of these categories, the ADA protects them. Because the ADA is a law, and not a benefit program, you do not need to apply for coverage.

EXAMPLES OF DISABILITIES

There is a wide variety of disabilities, and the ADA regulations do not list all of them. Some disabilities are visible, and some are not. Some examples of disabilities include:

- Cancer
- Diabetes
- Post-traumatic stress disorder
- HIV
- Autism
- Cerebral palsy
- Deafness or hearing loss
- Blindness or low vision
- Epilepsy
- Mobility disabilities such as those requiring the use of a wheelchair, walker, or cane.
- Intellectual disabilities
- Major depressive disorder
- Traumatic brain injury
- The ADA covers many other disabilities not listed here.

The dictionary definition of accessibility (əksəsə'bɪlədē) is: (noun) the quality of

being able to be reached or entered: *"The restoration project involved repairing the roof and improving accessibility."* SIMILAR :

- availability
- approachability
- obtainability
- nearness
- convenience

The quality of being easy to obtain or use: *"Students were concerned about the accessibility of quality academic counseling."*

The quality of being easily understood or appreciated: *"The accessibility of his work helped to popularize modern art."* SIMILAR:

- comprehensibility
- intelligibility
- understandability
- penetrability
- approachability

The quality of being easily reached, entered, or used by people who have a disability: *"Many architects believe that accommodating wheelchairs is all there is to providing accessibility."*