

## The Warm Rainbow Hug I Didn't Know I Needed

Whitney Lee Moeller

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In the GALA chorus community, there is an abundance of deeply moving stories about the positive impact of affirming choruses on our singers and audiences. As the Artistic Director of an affirming choir, my goal is to facilitate those meaningful experiences for our community. While I always understood the importance of creating a safe space for singers, I did not yet understand how profoundly that same space would hold me as a leader. In pursuing a positive environment for the musicians in my circle, my own calloused heart began to heal.

There was a painful season in my professional and personal life when each setback felt more devastating than the last, steadily fatiguing my spirit. With every blow, I questioned my resilience and wondered how I could possibly endure one more disappointment. I was caught in a perfect storm of financial strain, familial discord, and self-doubt. I looked back over years of hard work, perfectionism, and overachievement with regret. For what? Just as I thought I had found my footing, the COVID-19 pandemic came crashing in like a tidal wave, upending everything once again.

My wife and I both changed jobs multiple times, though I moved the most. I found myself in several toxic workplaces that left my nervous system in shambles. I began praying with desperation that something—anything—would lead us back to stability. I no longer dared to dream of my ideal career; I simply longed for a tolerable work environment and financial security.

The rejections eventually broke my spirit. One position was put on hold due to the pandemic after I had absolutely nailed the interview. When the organization later pivoted to hire a music teacher for remote learning, I eagerly applied again, hoping to be at the top of their list. Near the end of the application, I noticed a change that made my heart stop. The form now required a signature affirming that the organization believes marriage is between a man and a woman. I stared at the screen, connecting the dots. *This was added because of me.*

The words blurred as tears welled in my eyes. Heat rose to my cheeks. Then came an eruption of grief and rage—tears, shouting, and words I won't repeat here.

In many ways, I am still recovering from that season. But I am far stronger today because of my experience with Council Oak Men's Chorale in Tulsa, Oklahoma. When the president of the board called to offer me the position of Artistic Director, I was so giddy with delight that I began pacing the house, phone in hand. I mouthed, "I GOT IT!" to my wife, who grinned and gave me a thumbs up as I continued pacing. The president began sharing important details, and I confessed he might need to repeat them later—I was too excited to absorb anything. That evening brought happy, hopeful tears. I sensed it was the beginning of something special.

I was nervous on the podium. After everything I had been through, a touch of imposter syndrome was understandable. But the singers were immediately warm and trusting. They embraced me fully. It was the warm rainbow hug I didn't know I needed. Over time I have come to the realization that leading an affirming chorus is not only about cultivating musical excellence and belonging for the ensemble members. It also requires allowing oneself to belong in return.

Only a few months after accepting my position, we presented our first successful concert together, followed quickly by our trip to Minneapolis for GALA 2024. I was a bundle of nerves—mostly because I was also nine weeks pregnant.

After seven months of at-home insemination, I was absolutely thrilled. Still, I felt anxious about sharing the news with my choir. Once we arrived in Minneapolis, I knew suspicions would grow. I was opting out of social events and skipping performances and workshops to conserve energy for rehearsals and our performance. When I put on my concert attire, it was noticeably tighter around my midsection than the last time I had worn it. I decided to tell them during our warm-up, just before taking the stage.

They responded with overwhelming support and we carried that joyful energy with us into the performance. Scheduled immediately before the Los Angeles Gay Men's Chorus, the orchestra hall was packed for our seventeen-member ensemble. The sound of the applause nearly knocked me off my feet. It was breathtaking. Standing in that hall, surrounded by affirming ensembles from across the country, I understood that this was bigger than Council Oak Men's Chorale. GALA is a network of resilience. We are all artists insisting on joy in the face of rejection. I have never felt more seen. I look back on this whirlwind experience as the most thrilling and rewarding experience of my musical life.

Managing a full life of teaching, singing, conducting, and parenting is no small task. There were moments when I questioned my ability to navigate pregnancy and postpartum while conducting a tenor-bass ensemble each week, but I found unwavering encouragement from my choir family as they became my greatest cheerleaders. In supporting me, they strengthened the very leadership I sought to offer them.

To any reader who feels hopeless today: your time is coming. There is a chosen family waiting to be found. There is a place where your energy, expertise, and whole self will be welcomed and celebrated. The very resilience forged in heartbreak may one day become the foundation for your greatest joy.

I am profoundly grateful for every moment I get to spend with this loving family of musicians. I cherish these memories and know the friendships formed here will last a lifetime. Today, when I step onto the podium, I do so not only as a conductor, but as someone held by the very community I strive to serve. This is the gift of affirming choral work.

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