

Once behind bars, he now sings with Oakdale Choir as a free man

Dick Hakes, Taking Liberties

Published 2:22 p.m. CT Nov. 16, 2018 | Updated 12:05 p.m. CT Nov. 18, 2018



It was an emotional moment for Harold Searcy on Monday of this week as he sang with Oakdale inmates during a special session of the Oakdale Community Choir.(Photo: Peter Nothnagle/Special to the Press-Citizen)

Harold Searcy made what you might call local history this week.

When he was an inmate at Oakdale Correctional Facility in Coralville years ago, he became involved with its well-known Oakdale Community Choir, in which area citizens and prisoners sing together.

Since his release, Searcy has become something of a “returning citizen activist and advocate.” It was not easy, but he finally received permission to return to the prison to sing with the choir at a special performance on Monday.

Choir director Mary Cohen calls it a first -- a person who was once part of the choir on the “inside” reentering the prison to sing as member of the “outside” community.

“It was an honor to celebrate Harold’s first Oakdale concert,” Cohen said. “We premiered Paul Soderdahl’s song titled ‘Keep On Keepin’ On’ which is about perseverance. Harold’s consistent positive attitude is an inspiration to us all.”

Searcy, as you might guess, was thrilled.

“I actually waited nine years for this concert,” he said.

He once performed as a storyteller, and now he has his own story to tell.

“I was raised in a poor neighborhood in a northeast portion of Des Moines and graduated from a small high school there,” he said. “I experienced class politics at an early age.”

During the next two decades, he worked at factory jobs, was married and divorced twice and had three children. He is happy to still be on friendly terms with his family, including seven granddaughters.

He was arrested in Des Moines in the summer of 2003 at age 40.

His eyes water when asked about his crime, which he does not want to discuss.

“I made a mistake which I regret,” he said.

Searcy was behind bars for most of the next decade -- seven months in the county jail, six years at Oakdale (officially: Iowa Medical and Classification Center) and three years at the Mount Pleasant Correctional Facility.

He says he began working on his own personal rehabilitation almost immediately.

“In prison, I took a good long look at the man I was for 40 years, and I didn’t like that man very much,” he told me.

He says he signed up for every class offered to inmates, took correspondence courses, read books, became a chapel clerk at Oakdale and helped in the medical unit with disabled and elderly prisoners.

When Mary Cohen founded her choir there in 2009, she had it perform a song called “Perfect Peace” which was written by Searcy and which he enjoyed from the audience.

He later joined the choir and practiced for its next concert, but was transferred to Mount Pleasant and missed the actual performance – much to his dismay.

Released three years later, he credits a small Mennonite church in Kalona for helping to secure him a job and a new life.

“That church and community have been a tremendous source of support since the first day I walked out of prison,” he says. “Kalona even has a drug and alcohol treatment program, but most people don’t know about it.”

Now 55, Searcy lives in Riverside, works as an independent contractor and got involved in volunteering with Inside Out Reentry Community in Iowa city and similar organizations trying to help released prisoners succeed in society.

But at present, he is disabled. He fell off a portable stairway six months ago and shattered his wrist and ankle. Unable to work, he has filled his recovery time by stepping up his volunteer efforts.

He is involved with workshops, gives speeches, and volunteers with Digital Stories for Social Justice out of Grinnell. He is a peer mentor volunteer for the University of Iowa’s prisoner education program known as Liberal Arts Beyond Bars. Through Inside Out, he co-facilitates a group at the Hope House work release center in Coralville..

“He offers great support for others who are transitioning back into the community,” says Michelle Heinz, who is executive director for Inside Out.

Searcy was only recently approved for the Oakdale choir. He sang with it for the first time on Monday during a very unique “learning exchange” at the prison with the renowned Soweto Gospel Choir, which was in town for a Hancher performance.



On Monday, Nov. 12 Soweto Choir members rocked the house during a session with the Oakdale Community Choir at what is informally known as the Oakdale Prison in Coralville. (Photo: Peter Nothnagle/Special to the Press-Citizen)

As one who has been there, he says the more contact prisoners can have with outsiders who care, the better.

“Many prisoners have very poor social skills,” he said. “These programs are a huge benefit. They become a safe place where inmates can learn or relearn how to interact in the real world.”

He claims inmates often hear nothing but horror stories about their peers released from prison who screw up and are quickly back behind bars.

“I try to tell them that there is life after prison,” he said. “That there are people out there who care and there are tools to help them, but it is up to them to use the tools they get. They ask me: 'What is the key to staying out?' I tell them: 'Find your passion and do it.'”

Helping current and released prisoners is now his passion.

“I love it and I wish somehow I could make a job out of it,” Searcy said.