

Carroll County Times "Carroll's Yesteryears" Articles

"The Strawbridge Ensemble"

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By Jay Graybeal

Church, community, family and music have long been cornerstones of African-American life. Each of these themes are closely intertwined in the Strawbridge Ensemble which will perform at the Strawbridge United Methodist Church as part of the observance of Black History Month. Music Director James Cook has selected a special musical program for the February 20th event. The church service will begin at 10:30 a.m. under the direction of Rev. John A. Fokkio, Senior Pastor. Larry Brumfield will be the guest speaker. The public is cordially invited to attend the service.

The Strawbridge Ensemble will perform half a dozen spirituals from their wide repertoire of traditional and contemporary music. The mix of old and new hymns has broad appeal among the congregation. A typical Sunday service begins with a congregational hymn; later selections help set the tone for the various elements of the church service.

The Strawbridge Ensemble was formed in August 1991 at the suggestion of Mrs. Helen Nokes who sought to provide music while the regular choir took a summer vacation. The group was so enthusiastically received that it now sings as part of the last Sunday church service of each month. Two church members, James Cook and Ben Barnes, were instrumental in founding the Ensemble. Mr. Cook has served as the group's music director and pianist since its inception. He is a 1986 graduate of the University of Maryland, Eastern Shore and teaches music and directs the choir at Wicomico Middle School in Salisbury, Md. One admiring member praised his talent and devotion to perfection when he noted that "James won't sit still for anything but the best."

Music has always been important to Ben Barnes who served as the Ensemble's first president. During the 1980s, he sang with a spiritual group which performed in numerous locations throughout the mid-Atlantic states. His experience as a performer helped to broaden the group and led to performances outside of the church.

The Ensemble's membership, which currently numbers 20 men and women, has always been drawn from the younger members of the congregation. Many had sung together as children during the early 1980s in a youth choir organized by George and Portia Owens. As the young singers grew older and left for college and military service, the youth choir could not be sustained. Now that the graduates and veterans have returned to live and work near their family homes in New Windsor, Union Bridge and Westminster, they have renewed their interest in music.

Being a member of the Ensemble is also very much a family affair. The membership contains three sisters, two brothers, a father and his two children, an aunt and nephew, a husband and wife and other relationships. The sense of family and community has been an essential element in the group's success. In addition to performing at their home church in New Windsor, the Ensemble has sung for other congregations, including those of Union St., Cooksfield and Fairview United Methodist Churches. A 1992 performance at a Union Bridge festival led to an invitation to sing at Winter's Lutheran Church. The group has also sung as part of the annual Black Heritage Concert held at the Weinberg Center in Frederick, Md., and has made an annual pilgrimage to the March on Washington in Washington, D. C. Last April the group co-hosted the James Cleveland Workshop held at Western Maryland College.

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In addition to providing church music, the Ensemble serves a greater purpose. The young singers serve as positive role models for younger members of the community. In doing so the group helps reinforce the sense of family and community at a time when the need is great. Their impact on the next generation may turn out to be their greatest legacy.

Photo caption: Members of the Strawbridge Ensemble pose with family for an informal photograph at the Strawbridge United Methodist Church in New Windsor, Md. The ensemble will present a special musical program at the church on Sunday February 20 at 10:30 a.m. The public is cordially invited to attend and hear the mix of traditional and contemporary spirituals.