

Bill Rea ? This is for you, Jan

There are those experiences in life to which we eagerly look forward.

We rejoice in our hearts as they take place, and we feel let down when they are done.

I'm feeling let down as I write these words. I don't regret the experience, but I do regret it's over.

There is a high school in the west end of Toronto called HumberSide Collegiate Institute, which is marking its 125th anniversary this year. The main celebration took place over the weekend.

I attended that school; a member of the Class of '77. I therefore attended and participated in the observances, but there was more to it.

For many years, HumberSide benefitted from the services of a music teacher named Janet Keele, who ran the choirs, as well as directing annual musical productions. I took part in both during my high school years. They gave me an appreciation for music that has greatly enriched my life. They also gave me the chance to do things before live audiences of which I would have previously sworn I was incapable.

There was, and still is, a quality to her that I have always revered, and I know I am not alone. I well remember the day more than 40 years ago when Jan said she could tell who the Grade 13 students were because they now addressed her by her first name.

That same teacher, who has been retired for some years, organized an alumni choir to put on a concert Friday night in honour of the anniversary. I learned late last year from my brother Michael (Class of '72) that plans were in the works for a celebration, and that a choir would be assembled for a concert. I sent my former teacher an email, assuring her I would be on deck for being pressed into such service.

Some of you may have noticed that I was absent from community events in town the last several Wednesday evenings. The explanation is simple ? I was in rehearsal, along with about 140 other alumni, spanning the more than 30 years this lady taught there. Consequently, I spent those evenings with an eclectic mix of people I hadn't seen in years and a whole lot of total strangers. We were all under the command of a woman we all love very much.

The dynamic was impressive, especially when I reflected back some 40 years. I had seen this lady draw pleasing sounds from the diaphragms of a couple of hundred kids, overcoming things like changing voices, smart remarks and asides from a bunch of teens who thought they had suddenly become sophisticated, and a hell of a lot of hormones. But being a good teacher, she knew how to get around that.

For a lot of those kids, it was an easy credit. To others, myself included, it was a labour of love, never to be forgotten. That's what drew us back to the routine over the last several Wednesday evenings.

But things were different. Jan was no longer dealing with a bunch of teens. Many of her charges over the last couple of weeks are in their 60s, and a whole bunch of others (like me) are looking forward to that imminent milestone with a certain amount of dread. She frequently had to interrupt the reminiscing taking place in the ranks by barking the word ?Stop? in her very distinctive voice (she's still got it). She was very gentle when it came to telling some of the women that unless their voices were well trained and practised, they simply might not be able to hit a high G any more. At one point during one of the rehearsals, she asked the assembly to stand, after we had all been sitting for more than an hour. She was rewarded with a 30-second chorus of grunts as a room full of 60-something joints creaked.

She also somehow drilled into us a repertoire, that included show tunes, works by Mozart, Rachmaninoff, Simon and Garfunkel, and Vivaldi, among others. I had sung some of the pieces when I was a kid (I got through the Rachmaninoff largely on memory from the mid-70s).

And then there was the actual concert Friday night. I know I missed the last note in Scarborough Fair (I was close, but my voice wasn't where it was supposed to be), and I know I had a lot of company. But a couple of pieces later, we did a medley from Richard Rodgers, which concluded with a rather moving rendition of You'll Never Walk Alone (another one I was able to do pretty much from memory). Jan's body language at the end told us that was one we nailed.

The final work was the Hallelujah Chorus from Handel's Messiah.

Most of the concert can be found at www.facebook.com/hcialumni/videos/1507460605955649 (I'm the grey-haired, bearded, bespectacled guy somewhere in the middle), and I have to say I think the Hallelujah sounded pretty good. A lot of people I talked to later agreed, including Beth and Michael.

The last couple of weeks have been a tricky time, as I had to free up my Wednesday evenings. Like about 140 other people, I did it because I wanted to. Jan led us through it all because she wanted to.

HumberSide marked its centennial 25 years ago, and Jan, who was still teaching at the time, had put together an alumni choir, which

I joined with appropriate eagerness. I walked away from that experience happy that I had participated once again in something that had been such a special part of my youth, but sad as I realized I would probably never get a chance to do something like that again. But I did get another chance, and am now a lot more hopeful than I was 25 years ago.

Right after Friday's concert, I approached Jan, asking her when she would be forming her next alumni choir. I told her to count me in.

