

Bryant: A thank-you note to the Akoma Choir



[Erica Bryant](#), @Erica_Bryant June 5, 2015



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The Akoma Women's Gospel Choir has been hard at work practicing the songs it will sing to launch another group of young ladies into the world. In 1999, I was one of those young ladies. So as the choir approaches its 20th annual scholarship concert, I thought I would say thanks. For the college scholarship the singers provided me, and especially for the songs.

As a high school senior, I clapped along to the music but didn't really realize what a gift I was getting. That no matter what I would go through in life, there would be an Akoma song to help me make it to the other side.

For light problems, like chronic procrastination, there is "Get Your House In Order." For general life frenzy, there is "Stand Still." When faced with important decisions, I find myself humming "Order My Steps."

And then there are the songs that deal with what Akoma founder and executive director Arlette Miller Smith calls "struggle to strength." Songs that tell you not to get bogged down in negativity but to "Keep Your Hand On the Plow."

The plow is such an important symbol for the choir that Miller Smith had a farmer friend bring an actual plow to an early concert for use as a prop. Choir members would march in to a variation on "Soldiers in the Army," singing, "Our mother, your mother, their mothers were soldiers with praying hands on the gospel plow. One day they got old and couldn't fight anymore, they said, 'stand up and fight anyhow.' "

Akoma aims to connect generations of African-American women through our history of spirituals. In singing songs that our mothers and grandmothers and great-grandmothers sang to praise God, deal with the mysteries of life and get through hardship, we can almost hear their voices and feel their strength. We can honor those who toiled in fields, behind real plows, so that we could advance.



Singers prepare for an upcoming concert. Video by Erica Bryant

"Even in fallow fields, we have always found beauty," said Miller Smith. The choir always does at least one a cappella song, to pay tribute to singers who had no instruments but still managed to make beautiful music.

The women, who come from more than 30 different churches, come together and practice twice a month. Each singer I interviewed said that the choir is more properly described as a family.

Its scholarships are named for Nona Patterson Chambers, an Akoma member who was born in 1910 and had to leave school after the third grade. Chambers, a soprano, returned to the classroom in her 80s. She died on Christmas Eve in 2011, but her belief in the importance of education lives on in each of the 97 recipients of her scholarship.

“Beyond singing and having nice music and a beautiful harmony and sound, we have another purpose. That purpose is giving back to our young sisters in the community. ”

Esther Pinkston, Akoma member

Eight young women from the Rochester area will receive scholarships at this year's concert, which will take place at 6 p.m. June 13 at Mt. Olivet Baptist Church, 141 Adams St. The concert is free and open to all. Donations to the Nona Patterson Chambers scholarship fund are appreciated.

Chambers' daughter, Akoma member Esther Pinkston, was among those preparing for next weekend's concert at a practice session on Monday.

Pinkston said the singers were working hard, with music director Gloria Brooks drilling them on sound, technique and skill. "Beyond singing and having nice music and a beautiful harmony and sound, we have another purpose," she said. "That purpose is giving back to our young sisters in the community."

As one of their not-quite-so-young-anymore sisters, I am grateful.

EBRYANT@DemocratandChronicle.com



Gloria A. Brooks, executive music director of the Akoma Gospel Choir , directs a rehearsal at the First Church of God on Clarissa St. The choir is celebrating its 20th anniversary this year. (Photo: Annette Lein/@bikebizzle / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER)

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