Understanding the Need for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion: A Historical Perspective

Initial Formation and Growth

“The original purpose for which Sweet Adelines was organized in 1945 was educational; to teach and train its members in musical harmony and appreciation,” said founder Edna Mae Anderson. “The main goal was to create and promote barbershop quartets and other musical groups; another goal was to give musicals...public and private performances for...learning and general appreciation of all things pertaining to music.”

Sweet Adelines began in an exciting atmosphere, one that was very similar to what we experience today when a new chapter is starting. On July 13, 1945, Anderson of Tulsa, Oklahoma (USA) held a “women only” meeting in her home to discuss forming a group for chord-ringing harmony-singing women who wanted to participate in barbershop harmony. An existing choral organization, founded in 1938 as the Society for the Preservation and Encouragement of Barber Shop Quartet Singing in America, Inc. (now known as The Barbershop Harmony Society), did not allow women as singing members.

From that initial meeting in 1945 grew the nucleus of what was to become Sweet Adelines. By 1985, Sweet Adelines had more than 35,000 members in over 800 chapters throughout the United States, Canada, and Europe. But along the way, the International Board of Sweet Adelines took very decisive action to ensure that diversity and inclusion, as related to women of African heritage, could not be a part of the organization’s first 21 years.

Racial Exclusion in Sweet Adelines

In 1957, Sweet Adelines amended its bylaws to include only white women, with “white” defined as “Caucasian, Oriental, and Asian.” Sweet Adelines explained to members that this action only codified an existing policy. This action affected existing and prospective members as evidenced
by the continued protests from the initial announcement, which resulted in a decision by some members to resign from Sweet Adelines and some chapters breaking up.

Members from five Sweet Adelines chapters from Ontario (Canada), Rhode Island (USA), and Massachusetts (USA) came together to form Harmony Incorporated (HI), a new barbershop organization. Incorporated in 1959, HI was formed as “a new organization based on democratic principles and open to all women, regardless of race, creed, or color.” Six years later, in 1963, Sweet Adelines’ formal 1957 racial exclusion policy was still being enforced when a Canadian chorus wanted to include a singer of African heritage among its membership.

The Sweet Adelines chapter in Ottawa, Ontario, Canada petitioned SA Headquarters to accept the membership of Lana Clowes. Clowes was a woman of African heritage who had been directing and singing with their chorus for over a year and who was accepted by the chorus as a member. There were repeated requests by the chorus to headquarters, but Sweet Adelines refused to allow Clowes’ membership on any level. This racial exclusion action was heavily covered by Canadian newspapers. Sweet Adelines was labeled as a “racist organization” but stood by the decision. The incident prompted 20 members of the Ottawa chorus and Lana to form the Capital Chordettes in Harmony Inc.
Opening the Door to Racial Inclusion and Diverse Membership

It took nine years after the initial announcement for Sweet Adelines to decide to remove its racial exclusion policy. Current leadership has not found documentation that captured the reasons why Sweet Adelines rescinded the policy, how the decision was communicated to members, or whether any level of inclusion was then actively promoted.

Although members of other diverse populations have expressed issues of exclusion, there is no awareness of written or specific exclusion of other diverse populations, whether based on ethnicity, religion, ability, gender identities, or sexual orientations. This is not to say that such exclusions have not been felt or occurred, but to explain why the focus here has been on the history of racial exclusion. The racial exclusion was expressed, clear, and upheld for many years.

We have taken steps to rectify the past wrongs. In 2016, Sweet Adelines posthumously granted lifetime membership to Lana Clowes, and in January 2017, the first Sweet Adelines Diversity and Inclusivity Task Force (DITF) began pursuing its mandate. The DITF started with four members, including Thérèse Antonini (chair), Maria Christian, Valerie Clowes (daughter of Lana Clowes), and Janice Dorris. New members and roles have been added over the years. The mandates and actions are summarized below.

Mandate/Actions 2017-2018 DITF
- Provided the International Board of Directors (IBOD) with information about existing approaches to promoting diversity based on research and their associated challenges and levels of effectiveness
- Provided IBOD with recommendations for potential actions and initiatives to promote diversity and inclusion (final report)

Mandate/Actions – 2018 DTF
For 2018-2019, the DITF undertook the mandate to develop a long-term strategy and short-term tools to support diverse and inclusive membership in Sweet Adelines International. Strategies included:
1. Creating tools for self-assessment;
2. Recommendations for outreach and chorus culture development;
3. Maximizing volunteer member involvement; and
4. Focusing hearts and minds on achieving our desired state of transparent inclusivity.

Other actions ¹
- 2017-2019 – Diversity focused events held with membership at three successive International Conventions, culminating in a generative workshop in which groups determined topics and themes for the initial draft of the Chorus Toolkit.
- 2020 – Board stance rejecting songs with racist lyrics, messages, or history.
- 2020 – Song Assessment Tool (SAT) implemented.

Even with this work, there is much more to be done in many areas of diversity, equity, and inclusion.

¹ On the Road to Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Navigating the Journey
To ensure that the work of the DITF continues, in October 2020 Sweet Adelines IBOD announced the formation of the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) Council to be permanent stewards of this important work. The Inaugural Council was appointed in December of 2020 and held its first meeting in February of 2021. The DEI Council will also direct and supervise the work of the Chorus Toolkit subcommittee, the Song Assessment Tool Subcommittee, and DEI-related task forces as they are created.

Moving Forward

Our organization has stayed true to its original goals, entertaining and educating thousands of people every year. We are also committed to moving forward in a way more consistent with our motto, Harmonize the World.

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion within an organizational setting do not happen by accident or naturally. These values must be sought out, nurtured, and cultivated. It is human nature for people to associate with others who share similar characteristics.

Sweet Adelines and other barbershop organizations have a strong history of generational participation, with growth through personal interactions. These are wonderful attributes, not to be cast aside, but to treasure as we bring forth new members, new generations. Without action, we will miss the opportunity to grow and enjoy the myriad benefits that come from a fully inclusive, diverse, and equitable organization. And because human nature leads us to be most comfortable around others who share our individual characteristics, we can exclude others without ever intending to and without realizing it. In the words of D&I thought leader, Joe Gerstandt, “If we aren’t being intentionally inclusive, we are being unintentionally exclusive.”

We invite you to join us in working together toward diversity, inclusion, and equity as we choose to be inclusive in our work to continue fulfilling our organization’s original goals.