

Boy sings barbershop music, just like the father he can't remember

Ryan Henry hopes to be baritone, which is what his dad sang

By **Matt Soergel**

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BRUCE LIPSKY/The Times-Union

Ryan Henry (center) laughs with the rest of the Big Orange Chorus when the stadium announcer mispronounced the name of their leader. The Big Orange Chorus sang the national anthem before a Jacksonville Suns game June 21 at the Baseball Grounds of Jacksonville. Ryan, 12, is following in his grandfather and late father's footsteps by singing barbershop harmony.

The Big Orange Chorus' spring show is 3 p.m. Sunday at the Terry Theater at the Times-Union Center for the Performing Arts. The current international champion quartet and a bronze-winning quartet will also perform. For tickets go to www.bigorangechorus.com or call (904) 287-1896.

You don't choose your voice. It chooses you.

Ryan Henry, at 12, is still waiting to see what his will be.

"It used to be I had a really high squeaky voice. Not anymore," he says. He was once a tenor, but for now he sings lead, the melody, in a barbershop chorus.

That could change too: "He's hoping baritone," his mother, Sue Henry, says. "He's crossing his fingers."

Baritone, after all, is what Ryan's father sang, a baritone that took him around the world and almost all the states, to Carnegie Hall and the Grand Ole Opry, to national TV and BBC radio.

Ryan has seen videos of his father, listened to the five CDs recorded by his international championship-winning quartet. But he can't remember him. He was 2 when Rob Henry died of esophageal cancer, barely three months after being diagnosed.

Yet when he's standing with the Big Orange Chorus, a boy singing with dozens of men, he feels a little closer to him.

"I feel like I hear him singing because I stand right next to the baritone section," Ryan says. "He makes me want to sing baritone."

'THEY KNOW THE HENRY NAME'

Evening practice was about to start last week for the Big Orange Chorus in Jacksonville, but Ryan was still a little bleary eyed. He'd been under the weather, and though sixth grade is over, he's had Boy Scouts and band camp, playing trumpet and trombone.

He'll be OK though. "I took a nap," he says. "It was a good nap."

The barbershop chorus, some 40 voices strong, was practicing "The Star-Spangled Banner," which it would sing the next day before a Jacksonville Suns game. And it was getting ready for a big concert this Sunday at the Times-Union Center for the Performing Arts, where it will host the current international championship quartet, a group from Sweden.

Ryan is used to the routine. He's been around barbershopping — that's what barbershoppers call it — all his life. His maternal grandfather, Don Messler, sings in the Big Orange Chorus with him. Ryan has already gone to seven international competitions in the U.S. and Canada, and sung in two.

It's a close-knit world, and everywhere he goes in it, people talk to him about his dad. "They know the Henry name," Messler says.

Rob Henry, along with his brother Jim, sang in the Gas House Gang, a St. Louis quartet that was once the best — and among the most loved — in the world. After Rob died in 2003, the group continued for a couple of years, playing already booked shows, but it wasn't the same. It soon stopped performing, and was later named to the barbershop hall of fame.

Before practice, Sue Henry told some of that story, saying she had been astonished at the concern for Rob in the barbershop world. She still has three big binders full of printed emails that fans sent him when he got sick. And she told how barbershoppers, unbidden, set up a college trust fund for Ryan, one that will pay for four years of college at a state school.

That's news to him.

"They did?" he asks.

'A PURE JOY'

Big Orange Chorus director Tony DeRosa, whose son, Joseph, 9, is the only other boy in the chorus, says he believes Ryan sings mostly for the love of the music. Though there's another reason. "I just think it's innately in him. He's doing it because he's found a pure joy, something that he wants to do. But at the same time, he can honor his dad."

Ryan decided he wanted to sing in fourth grade, where he debuted with his elementary school chorus. His mother remembers: "He said, 'Mom, dad would be so proud of me.'"

Sue Henry agrees. "Rob would never have pushed him into it, but I think he would have been tickled pink that he did it."

Ryan, who will be going into seventh-grade at Pacetti Bay Middle School in St. Johns County, acknowledges there aren't many people his age interested in what he's into. "They always laugh me when they find out I sing barbershop. Everybody. Well, not the teachers. But basically everybody who doesn't know I exist."

A PERFECT BLEND

People always tell Ryan he looks like his dad. He's not sure about that: He's watched the videos of his dad singing, seen the pictures of him, and he doesn't see it. Seeing his dad doesn't make him sad, he says. It makes him proud.

Rob Henry was 42 and would have turned 52 on June 21.

Sue is now 43. She grew up in Williston among barbershoppers, and met Rob at a concert in 1992. Three years later they started dating, and three years after that they married. “When I married my husband it was forever. How did I know forever would be five years?” she says.

Rob, who had been an MP in the Army, came to barbershopping late. But he loved it, Sue says, and was moved, as any barbershopper is, by the musical overtones — the note that no one is singing, but that is created by four sets of varying voices in perfect harmony. As the Big Orange Chorus held a long phrase during practice, she pointed it out.

“You hear it?” Indeed it was there, rising out of the assembled tenor, lead, bass and baritone voices.

Rob Henry was a baritone, and maybe one day his son will be too. That would be fitting.

Baritone, though, is not the glamor voice in barbershop: The baritone usually doesn’t stand out. It doesn’t pop. But it’s a crucial part of the mix, and if it were to go away, you’d notice it. You’d know something was missing.

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