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REACHING OUT ONE BY ONE

Tom Trenney

HOW MANY TIMES have you read an editorial about the "terminal" state of the pipe organ? How many times have you heard someone at an AGO gathering say that he or she wished there was something that could be done to get young people interested in the organ? How many times has a colleague called to bemoan the lack of organists in the community? How many times has someone e-mailed you in search of a competent organ instructor in your area?

Almost 20 years ago, the American Guild of Organists saw the need to establish a series of summer programs to share the wonders of the King of Instruments with youth. These week-long regional events have come to be known as Pipe Organ Encounters. Later, it became clear that many grown-ups could benefit from similar instruction and inspiration, and the Pipe Organ Encounter Plus program was born.

This summer alone, 192 young adults between the ages of 13 and 19 attended Pipe Organ Encounters in a variety of locations around the country. As part of the POE registration fee, the students are offered a year's membership in their local AGO chapter. This means that for the 2004-2005 program year there are nearly 200 new young people involved in AGO chapters around the country. When one thinks of the size of individual chapters, this is a significant increase in the number of resources available to the AGO. Unfortunately, for many of these 200, their local chapter will never call to welcome them to a meeting. For many of them, a member of their chapter will never call to show them some of the instruments around town. For many of them, their AGO chapter's Web site will have no information about organ teachers or scholarship opportunities available in their area. For many of them, an invitation to play in a chapter members' recital will never be offered. For most of these 200, AGO membership will mean nothing more than getting a magazine in the

mail once a month; it will lack a personal connection entirely. As successful as the POE experience may have been, its impact can easily be lost if a follow-up is not offered at the local level and if initiative is not taken to feed the interest that has been sparked.

The Cleveland AGO Chapter offered me an amazing welcome as a young aspiring organist. I had come home from a POE in Pittsburgh as a 13-year-old who couldn't wait to immerse himself in the organ world. Fortunately, my POE teacher in Pittsburgh, Anne Wilson, was from Cleveland, and she was willing to shepherd me in my studies and was thoughtful enough to introduce me to and involve me in the life of the AGO chapter. The first chapter meeting I attended was at Ms. Wilson's church, and, as one might imagine, I was the only teenager there. Ms. Wilson made sure to introduce me to everyone and also saw fit to have Kool-Aid at the luncheon as well as coffee. That wonderful touch has resonated with me all these years. Had this wonderful mentor not helped me find my way, my interest could have easily been lost, and I would never have been so warmly embraced by an AGO community, which, for my whole life since, has been incredibly supportive, encouraging, and helpful in my journey.

We all can attribute any success we might have stumbled upon over the years to those people who took the initiative to help shape us early on. This article comes hoping that many of us will realize that creating a bright future for our beloved profession is our responsibility. We can not expect special summer programs to do all the work. We can not expect AGO task forces and subcommittees to be in charge of securing the future. It takes each of us reaching out to each other, one by one, to build a future. Make the phone calls, write the invitations, and stir the Kool-Aid. We can make a difference overall when we work to make a difference one by one.



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