Hello, my name is Sierra Lyon, and I am here to represent Abilities in Harmony. Abilities in Harmony is an adaptive show choir camp for middle and high school students that wouldn’t ordinarily have the opportunity to be in show choir a chance to sing, dance, and perform on stage.

We have a rich tradition of show choir in this area, with several local groups being ranked as some of the top groups in Wisconsin and across the country. I started the camp after spending a couple of months living with another family who have two children who have special needs. We were joking about how good they would be at show choir, and I realized that they truly would! After that I made the choice to start a show choir camp that would allow a student of any ability level to be a part of a show choir. For anyone who doesn’t know, show choir is a growing activity for schools across the country. Show choirs learn choral music and choreography that they perform on stage, and the groups range anywhere from 10 to 50 people.

The first camp was in the summer of 2017 with eight participating students who are a part of their schools special education program between the ages of 11 and 21. The camp was three days long for about three hours each day, and it concluded with a performance on stage in a local show choirs annual camp show. The camp was such a success that a second camp was held in the following February with **double** the students. The camps are now annual as the second summer camp was held last summer with such large numbers it had to be split into two, and there is a camp planned for the winter.

The camps consist of learning one to four songs with corresponding choreography that they perform in the camps concluding show. We also play games with the participants and have free dance time which is always a favorite. Each participant is matched with a volunteer that stays with them through the whole camp providing whatever kind of assistance they need. The camps also include a snack or meal for the participants and volunteers.

The volunteers assisting them are from area high schools and universities. It has been a great outlet for those who love show choir to give back to their community with show choir in an amazing way. It gives individuals who wouldn’t normally be on stage together the opportunity to do so. At our last camp we made the addition of having the adaptive camp perform a song with that high schools show choirs.

Since starting the camps, I have received requests from various communities across Wisconsin wondering if this opportunity could be available to their students as well. I have now begun starting camps in other communities, and this past summer I helped organize a new camp in the Chippewa Falls area. To accommodate the needs of this growing organization, I formed a non-profit organization.

We are growing in reach around the Midwest, but I would like to continue the growth in the Coulee Region as well. I am working to raise money to fund future camps held in La Crosse to make this a sustainable program as we do not receive funding from the schools that we hold camps in. As the numbers of participants have grown, so have our costs. It is important that we keep the camps affordable for families, as oftentimes, their budgets are already stretched thin due to medical expenses for their children.

These camps have far exceeded my expectations in interest, and there are many children who have been at every single one. Many of the parents have told me this is something their son or daughter talks about constantly and looks forward to. Some of the students I have had the pleasure of having at my camps have had to watch their siblings in show choir for years just longing to be able to do it themselves, and these camps have given them that exact opportunity.

The estimated cost for the camps in this coming year is $2000, so if Abilities in Harmony is fortunate enough to walk away with more funding today we would put it to use in our camps by paying for t-shirts and the meal they receive. It would also help pay for our administrative expenses. While we charge a nominal fee to participate in the camp, we never want to turn a child away due to an inability to pay. So we would like to offer camperships for families that can not afford the camp fee. The funds we would receive today would also go towards that.

We are blessed to live in a community that has so many resources for children with special needs to get to be active in a hobby of their choosing from horseback riding to hunting to soccer to sled hockey. Abilities in Harmony Adaptive Show Choir Camps are a piece to this puzzle of creating an inclusive environment in the La Crosse community. I hope you will consider helping to grow the reach of this organization to allow as many students as possible to experience the joy of show choir. Thank you. I am now available to answer any questions!