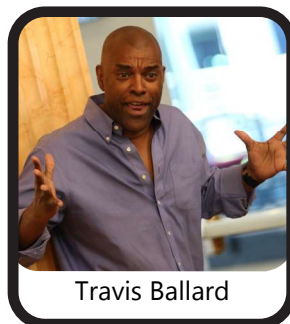




# Setting the Stage

After Festival 2012, GALA staff received an email from Travis, a gay African-American singer. Travis thanked GALA for an excellent festival and noted that while he felt welcome as a black man at Festival, it was like he felt welcome at “someone else’s party.” Travis rarely saw himself represented on the Festival stages, in workshops, guest artists or in Festival leadership.

Travis’ email, and a similar one from trans singer Sam Bullington, inspired the Open Table conversations. A group of individuals, including Travis and Sam, representing various races, ethnicities, gender identities, sexual orientations and mobilities began to explore how GALA could better reflect the variety of people attending Festival, from concert programming, workshops, and social events, to who is visible on stage as leaders, guest artists and instrumentalists. These conversations led to a radically different Festival 2016 and the creation of these resources to help



Travis Ballard

GALA member choruses move forward on the journey of creating “A New Harmony.” **GALA choruses have a unique opportunity to explore issues of equity, access and belonging because our choruses offer more than just a place to sing: they are also communities of belonging.** As a result, it is especially important that GALA organizations provide supportive environments where all individuals thrive and experience belonging.

We live in a world of rapidly changing demographics. Building an organization that truly reflects the community in which your chorus lives is a revolutionary act that can ensure your chorus’ health and well-being for decades.

## A New Harmony

Words like “equity, access and belonging” refer to issues of power, trust, and safety; to what is con-

sidered normal; and to recognizing which identities are placed at the center of chorus policies and practices. GALA choruses create a sense of safety and home that is lifesaving to many. Yet, even GALA choruses produce their own sense of normal, and those who exist in the center of this norm experience often-unrecognized dominance and privilege. It is possible to create a safe and supportive environment for all individuals if those in the center of the norm can move aside to make space for those individuals who are less dominant.

We all make assumptions based on our experience and that which is familiar. For example, we may assume that every individual in our chorus is gay or lesbian, politically liberal, or non-religious. We know from experience, however, that this is not the case.

Early drafts of this workbook focused on a model called DEI: Diversity, Equity and Inclusion. But the more we explored the vision of A New Harmony we discovered we could create a new way to frame this conversation without using the word “diversity”, which is overused today, or “inclusion” which innately infers that some people are “in” and others are “out.”

One way to work toward creating a sense of belonging in a chorus is to develop a culture of awareness and build a model that can be used regardless of what issue is being addressed. **Rather than inviting “them” into the circle with “us,” leading to an expectation of assimilation, we hope to create a broader circle so “us” and “them” becomes a new “we.”**

## LGBTQ Individuals and Privilege

While many straight people sing with GALA choruses, our choirs are largely made up of LGBTQ individuals who understand what it is like to grow up in a society without a sense of belonging. Those who have felt marginalized because of their sexual orientation or gender identity may experience empathy with others who have been marginalized for other reasons – race, ethnicity, disability, religion, socioeconomic status. Our common bond is a visceral understanding of how dehumanizing it is to be treated as a living embodiment of difference. Yet, for this same reason, LGBTQ individuals may experience an additional challenge in exploring issues of equity, access and belonging. It is common for

LGBTQ individuals to think of ourselves as marginalized in all circumstances and contexts, and to assume that only heterosexual people have societal privilege. However, this way of thinking ignores other sources of privilege which LGBTQ people may have: whiteness, socioeconomic status, gender expression, cis-gender identity, citizenship, and bodily mobility.

People who experience privilege often feel uncomfortable when others identify their dominance based on race, income, gender, etc. As a result, these conversations can be challenging. **As LGBTQ people (and straight allies), we must see beyond our own experience of victimization and begin to understand how we may unintentionally disenfranchise others**—and to graciously receive feedback from those with differing life experiences.

In order to fully engage in this conversation, let go of guilt, fully listen, and release the need to function at the center of interactions. When marginalized people share their experiences, believe them. Remember how it feels to be different. Then, thoughtfully participate in building a chorus that doesn’t unintentionally create new outsiders. Working together creates a new ‘we’ where all can feel that sense of coming home and belonging within a GALA chorus.

## Developing Trust

It is unrealistic and unfair to expect those who have been historically marginalized to immediately trust. Trust needs to be patiently and consciously built and rebuilt. If we feel offended when singers leave our choruses because their needs were not addressed, perhaps our desire to achieve “diversity” was motivated by a desire to appear progressive rather than a desire to be relevant and nourishing to those beyond the majority.

Being welcomed feels better than being excluded but tokenism does not foster belonging either. Be wary of coercing people into organizations not designed with their needs in mind. The work of institutional **transformation must happen internally in a chorus before inviting individuals from diverse communities to engage as full, centered members.**

Addressing equity, access and belonging takes significant time and commitment. If your chorus does



not have the resources for, or interest in, making these conversations a current priority, acknowledge that decision and move on. Come back to this workbook when your chorus has the time, commitment and resources to move forward on this journey.

## This Workbook as a Resource

The materials in this workbook can help your chorus develop concrete steps to explore equity, access, and belonging. With these resources chorus leaders and members may read, reflect and then design your own on-going steps for belonging within your chorus. As you begin, know that this process will not immediately change the diversity of your organization! **Creating a community of true belonging is a practice, not a goal.** Think of these conversations as an ongoing journey within your chorus.

Equity, access and belonging are mission-based initiatives which should help your chorus better reflect its mission, values and priorities, from the unique identities of the membership to the variety of programming and repertoire selected. However, each chorus

is as unique as its members. Therefore, equity, access and belonging will look different for each organization and, the process of creating A New Harmony will require sensitive conversation, honesty, and innovation.

This workbook is packed with resources and discussion guides. Jump in as you are able. Select a particular section to start. Take steps that are manageable without getting overwhelmed!

It is the belief of GALA Choruses that these topics are valuable for every member chorus. We hope that these conversations will inspire your chorus membership to embrace and celebrate change, and will launch your chorus on a journey toward a new harmony. We live in a world of rapidly changing demographics. Again: **building an organization that truly reflects the community in which your chorus lives is a revolutionary act that can ensure your chorus' health and well-being for decades.**

By creating communities of equity, access and belonging, GALA choruses will continue to create a world *where all voices are free!*

## TO CONSIDER...

There is no one-size-fits-all approach that will work for every chorus. Creating a new "we" is a process unique to each chorus. With these materials workshop participants will be asked to consider:

- ✓ what "we" means for members and for the chorus as a whole
- ✓ what barriers currently exist that keep the "we" as is
- ✓ what action steps may be taken to broaden the "we"