

HEALTH MATTERS

Health affected by who we are, where we live

It's called the "social gradient" — the more income and wealth you have, the longer you will live. In the Bay Area, for example, residents of the Berkeley Hills can expect to live more than a decade longer than those who live in West Oakland. Medical advances are important but not as important to our health as our ethnicity, our income and our neighborhood.

Filmmaker Larry Adelman is co-director of California Newsreel (www.newsreel.org), a nonprofit, social change documentary production and distribution center. He created and produced "Unnatural Causes: Is Inequality Making Us Sick?" a series that received a duPont-Columbia Award, and the best TV/Radio/Film award of 2009 from the National Academies of Sciences and Institute of Medicine.

Q: How did you become interested in the area of inequality and illness?

A: We first realized how the "outside" — our economic and social environments — can get under our skin as surely as germs and viruses, while producing an earlier series, "Race-The Power of an Illusion." That's when we learned that African-Americans suffer one of the world's highest rates of hypertension from a very real health risk — the added stressor of racism.

At the same time, we were shocked that the U.S. ranked around 30th in both life expectancy and infant mortality. How could that be? The puzzle began to unlock when we learned that contrary to myth, it wasn't CEOs dropping from heart attacks, but their subordinates. In fact,

the single strongest predictor of our health is our position on the class pyramid. Americans at the top live, on average, more than two years longer than the middle class — and seven years longer than the poor. Even after controlling for behaviors, glaring class and racial health inequities remain. Poor smokers, for example, are more likely to get sick than rich smokers.

Q: What are the drivers, locally and nationally, of inequalities and illness?

A: The United States has, by far, the most inequality among rich countries, and the worst health. The top 1 percent now owns as much wealth as the bottom 90 percent of us combined. The growing inequality has been greased by tax breaks for the rich, business deregulation, financial speculation, the decline of unions, racial segregation, globalization, and cuts in social programs.

These corporate and government decisions enriched the few, but also destabilized communities and unleashed more chaos and uncertainty in the lives of the rest of us, including anxiety about living from paycheck to paycheck, worrying whether our jobs are secure, our homes underwater, or whether our kids are safe.

These worries trigger the body's stress response in which corticosteroids flood the system, the heart beats faster, blood pressure rises, and glucose flows into the bloodstream — all

so we can run faster until the threat passes. But when threats are unrelenting, our bodies don't return to normal. This constant state of stress arousal, even if low-level, wears down our organs over time.

Q: What inequality/illness issues, if any, are particular to the Bay Area?

A: A recent report from the Bay Area Regional Health Inequities Initiative (www.barhii.org) documents how investment, lending, land use and other decisions shape the health of Bay Area residents.

It illustrates how higher poverty, racially segregated neighborhoods are filled with liquor stores and fast food outlets but lack full-service grocery stores. Parks, green spaces, and transit options are limited. Housing lies next to ports, freeways, chemical plants and other toxics, and is often isolated from other neighborhoods.

For example, African-Americans in West Oakland, adjacent to the port, have asthma rates five times the city average. They live, on average, 15 years less than white Americans in the Oakland hills just a few miles away. The big killer is not violence but a lifetime of wear and tear that increases susceptibility to heart disease, cancer, stroke, diabetes, obesity, drug and alcohol abuse, and other chronic illnesses.

The Bay Area workforce is also characterized by service workers tending to businesses,

tourists and the rest of us who are disproportionately non-white. Their jobs pay low wages, and lack benefits and career ladders. Unless they are unionized, the jobs rarely provide paid sick leave (except for San Francisco) or paid vacations, let alone paid maternity or paternity leave.

Q: What solutions could resolve some of these inequities?

A: Health inequities are not set in stone. We've made a difference in the past and can do so again. Average life expectancy in the U.S. improved by 30 years during the 20th century. Social scientists attribute most of that increase to social changes like the eight-hour work day, sanitation and housing codes, universal high school, Social Security, the right to collective bargaining, and civil rights laws, among others.

Class and racial health gaps both narrowed in the wake of the War on Poverty and the Civil Rights movement. But they started widening again in the 1980s when President Reagan began our now three-decade-long orgy of deregulation, tax breaks for the rich, and cuts in social spending.

Living-wage jobs, paid sick and family leave, guaranteed paid vacations, residential desegregation, universal preschool and access to college, and even local zoning decisions are as much health issues as diet, smoking and exercise.

As Harvard's David Williams says in our film, "Housing policy is health policy. Jobs policy is health policy. Education policy is health policy. Everything we can do to improve the lives of people is a health policy."

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FUSION

A&E + STYLE + SOCIETY

Choirs gather for Bay Area's great celebration

BY RICHARD SCHEININ
Bay Area News Group

SAN FRANCISCO — A 2009 study found that 42.6 million Americans sing in 270,000 choruses around the United States. Monday night, a high-class representation of those singing millions filled the stage at Davies Symphony Hall — over-filled it, in fact, spilling into the surrounding balconies and then flooding the concert hall with sheer exuberance and refined song.

As the night's organizers kept saying, it was an incredible sight: 416 high school singers from a dozen top choruses, standing elbow to elbow and serving up a world of music, from Gabrieli to Gaelic and Kenyan song. A few other adjectives apply, too: melodious, light-filled, inspiring.

The choruses had traveled from as far as Georgia and Hawaii, and from as close by as Palo Alto and Piedmont high schools, to participate in the first annual National Youth Choral Festival organized by Chanticleer, the San Francisco-based male chorus that pretty much defines the art of singing. After four days of rehearsals, lessons and master classes — some taught by Frederica von Stade, one of our epoch's greatest mezzo-sopranos — the groups gathered at Davies en masse to join in "The Singing Life," as Monday's festival-capping event was titled.

"Absolutely stunning and amazing," said Matthew Oltman, Chanticleer's music director, who conducted the program.

He was grinning. The massive chorus had just finished singing Gabrieli's "Jubilate Deo," a program-opening performance filled with gladness. Even better was what followed: William Byrd's "Ave Verum Corpus," which fell like hushed, merciful peace across the concert hall.

The hall, filled with the singers' families and friends, was abuzz as the program advanced:



An honors choir, drawn from the larger group and augmented by several Chanticleer members, sang the English madrigal "Sweet Honey Sucking Bees," by John Wilbye, with appropriate mischief. "Chou Nu Er," by Taiwanese composer Yi-Wen Chang — 2009-10 winner of Chanticleer's Student Composer Competition — drew a mood of glowing melancholy from the 416 voices.

Next came the centerpiece: The American premiere of "Annonciation," a largely forgotten cantata by the late French composer Jean-Yves Daniel-Lesur, who was a contemporary and friend of Olivier Messiaen — and whose music has been championed by Chanticleer.

His cantata, setting the religious poetry of Loys Masson, was commissioned by Radio France and performed on its live Christmas Eve broadcast in 1951. But, until Monday, an American audience had never heard it performed

— not one of those 270,000 American choruses had ever performed it, it seems. (That study, by the way, was conducted by Chorus America, a nonprofit arts service group.)

"Annonciation" is a quintessentially French affair — transparent, refined, unfolding in 10 movements and bearing a resemblance to Messiaen: chords that conjure blinding light pouring through stained glass; celestial sonorities, gilded by harp and celesta.

Given the limited rehearsal time, this was an impressive performance. Von Stade narrated in French, displaying that impeccable diction of hers. She was joined by an orchestra — drawn from youth orchestras around the Bay — which played this challenging piece with control and sensitivity; and by a pair of exceptional high school soloists, soprano Patricia St. Peter and tenor Matthew Curtis.

Tossing in hundreds of additional voices

— choral outbursts at once delicate and ecstatic, with Chanticleer's 12 singers peppered among the high-schoolers — this was an important exercise in collaboration for everyone involved.

Though what everyone was waiting for happened next: Chanticleer itself. The chorus performed two numbers, alone, with its usual astonishing flair: absolute precision of detail, coupled with depths of soul.

"Summertime," featuring the stratospheric solo work of alto Cortez Mitchell, brought down the house before the evening finished on soothing notes. There was "Shenandoah," featuring von Stade as soloist. Finally, the directors of all 12 high school choruses — Palo Alto High School, Piedmont High School, San Francisco School of the Arts High School and all the rest — came out to stand beside their 416 students, joining them to sing a heart-melting "Ave Maria."

At Chanticleer's National Youth Festival performance on Monday at Davies Hall in San Francisco, the renowned a capella men's choir and more than 400 high school students from choruses performed the U.S. premiere of "Annonciation" by Daniel-Lesur, with Frederica von Stade as the narrator.
Edward Lau / Courtesy of Chanticleer

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EYE CARE NEWS

Presented by **Mark Schmidt**
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PLAYING FAVORITES

If the brain happens to favor one eye over the other, usually due to poor vision in the less-favored eye, the image from the weaker eye will tend to be suppressed. As a result of this condition, called "amblyopia" or, more popularly, "lazy eye," the weaker eye will tend to wander inward or outward. According to the National Eye Institute, amblyopia is the leading cause of reduced vision among children, affecting two to three children in one hundred. Because "lazy eye" can lead to permanent

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