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THE HARMONY CENTER

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Mike Rowe
of "Dirty Jobs" fame
blames his **success** on
Fred King



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MIKE ROWE PHOTO: THE DISCOVERY CHANNEL
FRED KING PHOTOS THIS PAGE: BRIAN LYNCH

Fred, this is all because

Mike Rowe was a stuttering 9th-grader when he met the most outrageous and inspirational choral teacher ever to wear fake teeth. Mike's life changed for good the day he stole an "Oriole Four" record from the teacher's office. Here is one of the best Fred King stories of them all.

When strangers would ask me how I wound up with my name in the title of a hit show, I would never tell them the whole truth. That level of disclosure would require a mention of SPEBSQSA, and I've learned that long and unpronounceable acronyms make people anxious. So for the purpose of expediency, I would usually limit my reply to a quick anecdote about Jay Leno or Dick Clark, or some other Hollywood big shot that helped me along the path of B-list celebrity.

Of course, the truth is never found in Hollywood, and though I've done well in that town and made the acquaintance of a few famous people, I can assure you that none of them are responsible for my present good fortune. I found my success in bits and pieces, along the crooked parts of an unexpected path paved with good friends and close harmony. It was a road I had never

considered or even imagined—a road that began in Baltimore nearly 30 years ago, and meandered through 50 states and six continents. It's a road I continue to travel with great satisfaction, but were it not for Fred King, it would have most certainly been a road not taken.

At Fred's funeral, I sat quietly in the balcony, and tried to imagine a world where he had never lived. I thought of friends never made and songs never sung. Like one of those townspeople in Bedford Falls, I saw myself stumbling around in some dismal, alternative universe, my "wonderful life" hopelessly altered by the



e of you

Mike Rowe has worked in the entertainment business for more than 20 years. He is best known as the creator and host of the Emmy-nominated "Dirty Jobs with Mike Rowe." In that capacity, he has appeared around the world in sewers, garbage trucks, crab boats, and dairy farms while artificially inseminating more barnyard animals than any other host in television history. Recently, he completed his 200th dirty job and launched a website called *mikeroweWORKS.com*, a PR initiative to reinvigorate the construction and technical trades.

absence of one high school music teacher.

Robert Frost wrote that "way leads on to way..." and I suppose that's true. But looking down at the crowd that filled the church, at the hundreds of people who had traveled far and braved a hurricane to pay their respects, it was clear that my old friend and mentor had been more than a director of music; He had been a director of lives, and without even trying he had changed the direction of mine. So even though you haven't asked the question, I'm going to pretend you did. And this time, my answer will include a 70-year-old acronym, a newer name that they can remember, and the part I usually leave out.

Mr. Holland? Please report to the main office

When we first met in September of 1977, Fred King and I were each beginning our first day at Overlea Sr. High School in Baltimore County, Md. I was a skinny freshman with a deep voice and a weird stutter and he was Mr. King, a new teacher assigned to an anemic music department that consisted of one bloated choir filled with students who thought they had signed up for a "free period."

There is simply no way to overstate the impact of our first encounter. Remember George C. Scott's opening speech in "Patton"? Well, Patton was a sissy. Mr. King walked into the



THE DISCOVERY CHANNEL

Mike (second from left) in 1981, at the time about 18 years old “and as skinny as my tie.” Singing with him are Mike Price, Chuck Klausmeyer (by this time “in full control of his lower GI tract”) and their choral teacher, barbershop mentor, chapter chorus director and inspiration Fred King.



crowded classroom and greeted us with two words. “Shut Up!” His voice was stunningly loud. In the silence, he passed out a piece of sheet music far beyond anyone’s ability to sight-read. It was a six-part cappella arrangement that appeared to be in Latin.

Walking quickly to the piano, Mr. King gave us the pitch and started to conduct. I don’t know what he was expecting, but when no sound emerged from our baffled windpipes he looked curiously around the room and then at his own hands, as if the problem might have originated there. Frowning, he gave us the pitch a second time, and began to conduct again.

Silence.

“This is the Overlea Senior High School Concert Choir, is it not?” When no one replied, Mr. King closed his eyes and took several deep breaths, as though he were trying to calm himself. Then, he came unhinged.

Slapping his hand on the piano with a mighty wallop, Mr. King launched into a tirade that featured expressions most often heard in pool halls and saloons. He foamed. He raved. He swore. Veins appeared in his neck and forehead. He tore the sheet music into shreds, and threw them directly into our stunned faces. He cursed our incompetence and wondered aloud what cruel twist of fate had brought him in contact with such “a pathetic group of clueless mutes.” Then, he kicked the music stand across the classroom in disgust, and pointed to the open door. “If you’re not ready to sing,” he bellowed, “GET THE HELL OUT!”

It was a phenomenal exodus. Half of the class gath-

ered their books and never looked back. Some actually ran. When they were gone, Mr. King slammed the door behind them, stomped back to the piano, and glared at those who dared remain. For at least 10 seconds he just stood there, breathing deeply, and trying to get himself under control. Then, his face cracked in half.

Technically, one might describe the phenomena as a “smile,” but if the intended consequence was mirth we’ll need to settle on another term. The cruel gash that slowly opened between his nose and chin revealed a stunning rictus of rotten enamel. Baby teeth were crowded up against giant incisors. Molars sprouted from the spot normally reserved for canines. And the two front teeth, though properly placed, were the size of small thumbs and jutted desperately past his ever-widening lips, as if trying to escape the diseased gums from which they hung.

Beth Miller gasped. Cindy Schultz screamed. And the rest

of us lurched backward as the magnitude of this dental disaster was slowly revealed. When he had our attention—completely and totally—he spoke.

“Ladies and gentlemen, the cowards have departed. Let’s have some fun.”

For the next three years, that’s exactly what we did. We talked. We laughed. We learned. We beheld a treasure trove of fake teeth. And of course, we sang. With no regard for standard curriculums and not one shred of political correctness, Mr. King went about the business of challenging us like no other teacher would ever dare. Musically, there were pieces like Vaughn Williams’s “Hodie,” and Bach’s “Mass in B-Minor,” ambitious works so far beyond our ability that we didn’t know any better and learned and performed them anyway.

But the personal challenges were even greater. When Mr. King found out I had never sung before, he assigned me a solo in our first concert that was several notes out of my range. When he saw the fear on my face he kept me after class for private voice lessons. When he learned that I stuttered, he suggested I audition for the school play. (By “suggested” I mean “demanded.”) After stammering my way through a monologue, he stopped me.

“Mikey,” he said, “This character doesn’t stutter. Understand? Get into the character. You can stutter on your own time.” Without questioning the glibness of his direction, I simply followed it, and read the passage again—flawlessly. A light bulb flashed. New possibilities opened before me.

There is simply no way to overstate the impact of our first encounter.
REMEMBER GEORGE C. SCOTT'S OPENING SPEECH IN "PATTON"?
 Well, Patton was a sissy.

He was a teacher who made things happen. Just a month into that first year, outraged by a lack of school spirit around the big homecoming game, Mr. King appropriated a snare drum from the orchestra department and began rapping out a cadence that might inspire a soldier to charge into battle. "Mike, walk with me. Everybody else, fall in!"

Leaping from our chairs, we followed Mr. King out of the music room and down the solemn hallways of Overlea, shattering the quiet and bursting into seventh period classes uninvited and unannounced. "Study later!" he bellowed. "A battle is at hand. Rise up and follow me!"

Teachers were dumbfounded and students were unable to resist. Like a piper, Mr. King marched us up and down the hallways, out the back doors and out onto the football field where the Overlea Falcons were preparing to get their butts kicked by a much better team. There, on the far end of the gridiron, he taught us the school song. (The juniors and seniors were particularly amazed, having no idea that a school song even existed.) He addressed us as an army general might, demanding our loyalty, challenging our spirit, calling the players on our team "heroes" and praising their courage for carrying our collective honor. He was a one-man pep rally and had the entire school in the palm of his hand.

After that day, singing seemed cool to a lot of kids who had never given it a second thought. Even the jocks wanted to be in Mr. King's class and he made room for them. Overnight, the concert choir swelled from 25 to 70. A boys chorus was formed. Then a mixed chorus. A madrigal group. A concert chorale.

I joined them all.

Birds of a feather

One day during my junior year, I came across an old record album in Fred's office. (By this point, I was welcome in his office and allowed to call him Fred.) It was a funny-looking album with four black and orange birds on the cover. The birds had been drawn to resemble stick figures and they appeared to be singing. One was holding a top hat. Another had a cane. I couldn't imagine the sound made by four singing birds, so I put the album on the stereo and turned up the volume.

When the opening chords of "Hi Neighbor" came crashing through the speakers, my jaw dropped. How could four men make that much sound? By the second verse of "Danny Boy," I was spellbound. "Old Folks" left me transfixed. And during the tag of "Somewhere," I very nearly crapped my pants.

My intent was not to steal the album, but that is precisely what I did. I took it home without permission and listened to it over and over and over again. I learned the bass part to every song as well as the lead. The tenor was easy enough to hear but too high to sing along with. (The baritone was a mystery.) I played the album for my best friend, a guy named Chuck Klausmeyer, who also sang in the boy's chorus. He reacted the same way, except during the tag of "Somewhere" he really did crap his pants.

We were fascinated. They were a barbershop quartet and they called themselves **The Oriole Four**. According to the back of the album, they had won some sort of gold medal. What was that about? Were they Olympians? And why were they wearing tuxedos?

By Sunday, Chuck and I had memorized most of the songs. We were singing duets from the album, lead and bass respectively. I thought we sounded pretty good together and started wondering how we might sound with two more parts. That Monday at school, I went looking for answers.

"Fred, what is S.P.E.B.S.Q.S.A.?"

"Fred, why can't I hear the baritone part?"

"Fred, look how skinny you are in this picture!"

"Fred, can you make me sound like Don Stratton?"

Fred looked at me for a moment with no expression, "Mike, don't ever take anything from my office again."

"Yes, sir."

I held his gaze for about ten sec-



The Chorus of the Chesapeake at the 1983 MAD district fall contest. Fred is bottom left, Mike is in the featured quartet, behind the singer in the cape.



THE DISCOVERY CHANNEL



THE DISCOVERY CHANNEL

Mike (third from left) in high school in his first quartet. "We called ourselves Semi-Fourmal, because we dressed in tuxedos and tennis shoes. Naturally, we misspelled 'formal' on purpose because there were four of us and we were terribly clever."



"Thank you. I won't."
"And one more thing."
"Yes, sir?"
"Nobody sounds like Don Stratton."

Pardon me, do you know what century this is?

The next night, at approximately 7:45 p.m., Chuck and I pulled through the gates of City Hospital in East Baltimore. We followed the directions to the former nurses dormitory and climbed up the stairs toward a large banner that read, "Chorus of the Chesapeake, International Champions, 1971 S.B.E.B.S.Q.S.A. Dundalk, Md." With no clear idea of what awaited us on the other side, Chuck and I walked through the glass doors, and into a time warp.

One hundred and fifty men were spread throughout a large room, most of whom we assumed had come directly from work. There were cops and postmen and firemen, all in uniform. There was a milkman and a clown tapping a keg of beer in the corner. I saw a train conductor and priest. A cowboy and an Indian. I saw baseball players wearing old-time uniforms. Several men were dressed like professional card dealers, with shiny vests and armbands. And some appeared to be hobos,

onds. Then, he wrote something on a piece of paper.

"Be at this address tomorrow at 8 p.m."

"Yes, sir."

"Bring Chuck, too."

"Yes, sir."

As I walked out, he handed me the album and said, "Here, keep it. Learn it. And don't lose it."

tattered and unshaven with soot on their faces.

It was a bizarre scene, made stranger by the fact that most of these men were clustered in groups of four, singing face to face, nose to nose. The cacophony was all around us, dozens of beehives each buzzing a different tune, oblivious to the others.

"It's called woodshedding, boys. And it's not always pretty." Fred had come out of the throng with another guy that looked vaguely familiar. This is Bob Welzenbach," he said, "a friend from the old neighborhood." I didn't recognize Bob from the album jacket because he had shaved his beard. But I did recognize Jim Grant and Don Stratton, who had come up from the other direction and taken a position next to Chuck. Before I could digest what was happening, Fred put a shiny disk to his lips and blew a pitch. A moment later, the air around me exploded.

*Yes, we're sweethearts,
Suzie and me!*

*Away back home in Yonkers,
All the fellas envy me cause I have got a Sweetie
known as Suzie ...*

The album I had just memorized had come alive, and the sound was almost too much to process. It seemed to come from above them and filled the entire room with overtones that crackled and hummed. Chuck and I stood there grinning like idiots. The other foursomes immediately disbanded and ran over to listen. (When the Orioles sang, everyone listened.) I won't say that I wept, but when they hit the tag—Suzie's my favorite gal ... Oh what a GAL!—the sound knocked the moisture from my eyes.

When the applause finally ended, Fred told the crowd to grab a beer and take a seat. **The Chorus of the Chesapeake** was sponsoring a "Quartet Send-off," and dozens of quartets from around the region were apparently headed off to compete against other quartets from around the country. The whole idea was overwhelming. Somehow, I had formed the impression that The Oriole Four was the only source of barbershop harmony in existence. But now I was learning that there was an entire society, with thousands of members, and hundreds of chapters and thousands of registered quartets. Some of them were right in front of me. There was **The Reign-Bows End**, **The Friends of Yesterday**, **The Preservation Quartet**, and **Fascinatin' Rhythm**. The **B&O Connection** was there, along with **The Captain's Chorders**, and half a dozen others. I sat there next to Fred listening to grown men sing about mothers and sweethearts and old friends that would never forsake you. These men—some veterans of the Second World War—sang with unapologetic joy and sentimentality. They sang about patriotism and good old-fashioned girls and home sweet home. They sang

When the opening chords came
CRASHING THROUGH THE SPEAKERS, MY JAW DROPPED.
 During the tag of "Somewhere," I very nearly crapped my pants.

songs I'd never heard but somehow recognized.

The applause and support for each quartet was long and loud, and when the last one finished Fred told The Chorus of the Chesapeake to take their positions on the risers. Because we had no positions of our own, Fred instructed Chuck and me to stand directly behind him. He then asked the various quartets to join the chorus and once again pulled out the shiny disk and blew another pitch.

The song was "That's What I Call a Pal," and if I failed to accurately capture the effect of four men singing as one, I'll have no hope of describing the sensation of 150. The sound was huge beyond comprehension, a wall of perfectly tuned testosterone controlled entirely by Fred's fingers and targeted to that small spot directly between my eyes. I could do nothing but stand and gape in stupefied wonder as tears ran down my cheeks, and Chuck once again quietly crapped his pants.

The chorus rehearsed for at least an hour, but I couldn't tell you what else they sang because I had gone temporarily deaf. When Fred dismissed them, another keg was tapped and the men of Dundalk got down to business. Chuck and I were separated, shanghaied by various foursomes, and introduced to the mysteries of woodshedding. A nice old fella named Bob Seay, who

I later learned was the founder of the chorus, taught me a few tags, and told me "Son, you got the pipes."

Out in the parking lot, long after midnight, The Oriole Four sang half a dozen songs straight into my face. It was a private concert that will never be trumped. Then, in a gesture whose significance I could not yet know, Fred asked Don Stratton to step aside and let me sing the bass part to "Old Folks." I can't say I remembered every word or nailed every note, but I got my share. More importantly, I got to say that my first complete song ever sung in a barbershop quartet was in the company of The Oriole Four.

That night, Fred King changed the trajectory of my life. I joined the Chorus of the Chesapeake the following week, and with Fred's help formed my own quartet. (Chuck sang lead and eventually got control of his lower GI tract.) We called ourselves **Semi-Fourmal**, because we dressed in tuxedos and tennis shoes. (Naturally, we misspelled "formal" on purpose because there were four of us and we were terribly clever.) Fred coached us after school, and in no time we were singing for anyone who'd care to listen and a few that probably didn't. From street corners to nursing homes to Carnegie Hall, I got hooked on an audience and never got over it.

I learned enough about music to fake my way into



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With his pitch pipe he was an aging king holding his scepter.
I WONDERED IF I MIGHT EVER BE LUCKY ENOUGH
to change the course of a single life as he had changed mine.

The Baltimore Opera, which somehow led to a gig at The QVC Shopping Channel, where I sold karaoke machines in the middle of the night. Barbershop harmony got me through the stage door of the entertainment industry, and eventually I wound up in New York and Hollywood hosting game shows, talk shows and travel shows. Today, I have a job that I love, friends that I cherish, and opportunities that all began with an unforgettable music teacher, a barbershop quartet and a pile of old songs that continue to play in my memory.

Just the echo of a sigh

The last time I saw Fred alive was a day or two after Christmas, 2007. I was on my way to Alaska for work and decided to stop by Baltimore for a quick visit with friends and family. I'm glad I did. Turns out The Chorus of the Chesapeake had organized a holiday "Beer Blast." (The boys at Dundalk still prefer to name their gatherings in a way that captures the event's true purpose and draws the biggest possible crowd.)

I arrived late to a banquet hall jammed with

several hundred singers but found Fred right away, comfortably situated in a corner holding court, from his wheelchair. He was surrounded by a few dozen people and teaching a tag to four kids in their early twenties. I watched him conduct with his pitch pipe—an aging king holding his scepter.

Like his old pal Jim Grant, Fred was down to one leg and fighting the diabetes every day. The most recent stroke had taken a terrible toll, and I was struck by how frail he looked—and pale. But as I watched from the edge of the crowd, I saw that he still commanded the same attention. The same magnetism. People still needed to be near him and they clung to his every word.

When I caught his eye, he smiled big, and greeted me with a predictable salutation. "Fwaciss!" he exclaimed in a surprisingly hearty baritone. (Fwaciss isn't really a word—it's how you pronounce a truly inappropriate acronym too tasteless to spell out here. He's been greeting me that way since high school.)

I walked over, knelt down, and kissed him on the forehead. "That's a hell of a way to lose weight," I said,

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looking at the space where his leg used to be.

“Don’t worry, Hollywood—my other one will still fit up your butt.”

We laughed and talked and caught up fast. Me, kneeling on the floor, Fred, leaning forward in his chair. It had been nearly a year since I saw him last, and I had a thousand questions but so did Fred: When Fred has questions, he goes first.

“How many of those dirty jobs have you done now?”
“200.”

“Damn! How many states have you been to?”

“All of them.”

“Holy Crap, Mikey! That’s great! Do you still love it?”

“Well,” I said, “it’s a lot like woodshedding. Fun to do but hard to watch.”

He laughed again, and asked about my latest adventure. He wanted to hear about my life and my career. He told me again that he was so proud, and I told him again that I was so grateful. As we continued to catch up, others came by to say hello and pay their respects.

“These days, when people see me they figure it might be for the last time,” he said. “So they keep saying good-bye. Makes it awkward when I keep showing up.”

At some point, the random woodshedding evolved into the inevitable “pickup” quartet competition. I can’t say the beer enhanced the singing, but it certainly improved the listening. However, after a particularly brutal rendition of “Lida Rose,” Fred turned to me and said, “Mike, I think we can take this thing.”

“Really?” I replied, “the gold?”

“Is there any other color?” he said. “Go grab us a tenor and a baritone.”

Ten minutes later, I was wheeling Fred to the front of the room. With me were Rick Taylor, director of the chorus, and Bob Seay, a tenor with a medal and the grandson of the guy that taught me my first tag. (When in doubt, stack the deck.) The song was “Ebb Tide,” arranged by none other than Fred King and taught to my old quartet by the man himself almost 30 years ago in the classroom where we’d first met.

*First the tide rushes in
Plants a kiss on the shore
Then rolls out to sea,
And the sea, is very still once more ...*

As we sang, I couldn’t help but think back to those early years at Overlea, and it occurred to me that Fred was the same age then as I am today. I don’t know why that struck me as relevant, but it did. I thought about the many students he had touched over the years and the many viewers who watch my show every week. And I wondered if I might ever be lucky enough to change the course of a single life as he had changed mine.

When the song ended, the crowd rose and clapped



The victorious quartet at the December 2007 “Beer Bash”: Bob Seay, Mike Rowe, Rick Taylor and Freddie King.



for what seemed like 15 minutes. I can’t say I remembered every word, or nailed every note, but I got enough of them. Not that it mattered; with Fred singing lead, we were pretty much a shoo-in.

Sure enough, when the final “scores” were tabulated, we won first prize that night, and though the “medal” wasn’t really gold, I kept it anyway. In fact, I still have it.

I suspect I always will. ■

Bonus audio at barbershop.org

In the late spring of 2008, Rick Taylor (tenor of Old School and director of The Chorus of the Chesapeake) interviewed Mike Rowe for a planned story in *The Harmonizer*. This story was to have been about Mike and his early barbershop career, so Fred King came up often in the conversations. Mike, Rick and Fred all go way back, and the interview was originally intended only for Rick’s notes. With Mike and Rick’s permission, a shortened and “bleeped” download of these two conversations is available at www.barbershop.org/Roweinterview.aspx