

Holdhusen loves to help USD students create music

By Travis Gulbrandson
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David Holdhusen said his "ah-ha moment" came when he was in ninth grade.

That was when he was chosen to participate in the American Choir Directors Association's National Junior High Honor Choir, a three-day workshop held in Louisville, KY.

"I just fell in love with the process during that time, sitting there watching Sally Herman, the conductor, and seeing her work with around 200 students from all 50 states thrown together in this room to put on a concert," he said. "It was so exciting to me, I knew right then that's what I wanted to do."

And that's what Holdhusen has done at the University of South Dakota, where he serves as director of choral activities, a position for which he is now entering his sixth year.

His role involves overseeing and directing all three of USD's choirs, the Chamber Singers, the Concert Choir and the Men's & Women's Choir for a combined total of at least five concerts per year.

Holdhusen also teaches classes in conducting, choral literature and techniques, as well as voice.

"I love working with the students to create the music," he said. "From the first day they get the packet (of song selections), to watch them digest how much we have to do, and then the process of building through it until we stand on that stage for that concert is very exciting to me."

Choosing the selections each choir performs is a very in-depth process, he said.

"I've started thinking about what we were going to do for this year at the end of last year," Holdhusen said. "I've listened to music, I've taken recommendations from colleagues, I think of pieces that I know and studied in school, and it's just a matter of making the choir and the music fit together."

Holdhusen said he wants to challenge and educate the students, while at the same time provide listening enjoyment to the audience.

"It's that balance of

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trying to fit all those things together that I love," he said. "It takes a tremendous amount of time – it's probably the most time-consuming part of my job, just trying to make that work."

A native of Sioux Falls, Holdhusen earned his bachelor's degree from Gustavus Adolphus College in St. Peter, MN. He taught for a year in Wisconsin, and then earned his master's from Northwestern University at Evanston, IL.

He taught in suburban Chicago for the next six years before he earned his doctorate at Florida State,

after which point he came to USD.

"My wife and I never dreamed this job would just kind of open," Holdhusen said. "I came in as an interim, and they liked me and I stayed. We never expected to be able to come 45 miles from home. It just worked out well."

Although he plays "a little" piano, and played violin during high school and college, Holdhusen said he always has maintained more focus on "the vocal side of things."

"I am a coach-type person, and to be able to do music and coaching,



conducting was the way to go," he said. "To be able to rehearse and help motivate students, that's what got me."

He always reminds his conducting students, "You have all the power, and none of the power."

"You can think what

you do means everything, but if (the choir) doesn't respond..." he said.

That's one of the challenges of the job, and it's one of Holdhusen's favorite aspects of it.

"I love building the trust with the choir," he said.

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