

STILLWATER — For most vocalists the prospect of the crowd bursting into laughter during a performance is a nightmare. But in the case of local barbershop quartet "The Laryngospasms," it's all in a day's work.

By day, the five members put people to sleep as certified registered nurse anesthetists. But after patients have been sedated and cured of their respective maladies, these CRNAs lose the scrubs (at least until they're on stage) and stretch their own vocal cords, rather than a patient's.

Stillwater resident Rich Leyh, 42, saw the group perform at a meeting of fellow CRNAs some 13 years ago, and immediately knew he wanted to make people laugh by singing. Soon after, the father of two — who is usually a tenor or alto — was asked to join The Laryngospasms.

While the line-up has changed over the years (the other current members are metro-area residents Gary Cozine, Keith Larson and Doug Meuwissen) the group has continually honed its humorous, rather esoteric, stylings since it first formed in 1990. Today, it has become perhaps the world's only (read: best known) barbershop quartet that sings spoofs of well-known standards almost strictly for fellow CRNAs.

Talk about a core audience.

Despite the group's tongue-in-cheek approach, the members all have kids at home and face the same trials and travails of any other musician — time away from home and work vs. practicing a craft.

Currently, the group is working on its third album,

featuring its wackiest twists on tunes yet, and gearing up for a tour out west. And yes, the group does get paid to sing.

In the mean time, Leyh, who works at Lakeview Hospital, was kind enough recently to take off his mask and chart out his path to anesthesiological stardom in an interview with the Press.

SCV Press: How did you end up in Stillwater?

Leyh: I'm originally from California, transplanted in 1994 when I chased my then-girlfriend, now-wife back here. Stillwater has been my home since 2003. We were in St. Paul from 1994 to 2003, and California before that.

SCV Press: Why did you decide to join the group?

Leyh: I was just beginning anesthesia school, and I'd seen these guys perform at the 1995 AANA meeting in Minneapolis, and they were hilarious and very well received. I was flattered to be asked and felt it would be a great counterpoint to the rigors of school.

SCV Press: Have you always sung barbershop?

Leyh: I've always loved acapella music, and finally became involved with a barbershop chorus back in the late 80s/early 90s. The quartet I belonged to was comprised of three other guys from the chorus. It was great fun and I learned a lot about singing from my experiences with them.

SCV Press: How often do you guys gig each year, and where?

Leyh: As the years have gone by, the gigs have gotten larger and fewer between. Earlier in the group's history, it wasn't uncommon to do five to eight gigs per year, often small local shows, charities, etc. The last two to three years has really (brought) the change to one to



Keith Larson

three larger shows each year. This past year (2008) we performed in Anaheim, Calif., San Francisco and Minneapolis. Our next gig is in San Diego in May, I think.

SCV Press: Describe some of your repertoire.

Leyh: Well, let's see ... there's "Ring of Fire," originally done by Johnny Cash, of course. Our version is about hemorrhoids. Two of our most popular are "Breathe", sung to the tune of "Dream" (one of the first songs, about an anesthesia student trying to get his patient to breathe while everyone else stands around waiting for him), and "Wakin' Up Is Hard To Do", a parody of Neil Sedaka's song by nearly the same name.

SCV Press: How does the song-writing process usually work?

Leyh: We usually start with a song that is well-known and recognizable, then



-Submitted photos

Rich Leyh

find an elegant, humorous substitution for the chorus, and if that works, fill in the verses. A rhyming dictionary is priceless when it comes to finding lyrics — when you need a six-syllable word end-

ing in "shun", it gives you a choice of 20 or so. "Circumnavigation", for example.

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SCV Press: How many hours do you practice a week?

Leyh: Our practices are driven by the gigs we have coming up, how long they are, and how many changes. Typically, we don't practice in the summer or Christmastime (too hard to get together).

SCV Press: Ever sing to patients/hospital staff? What are their reactions?

Leyh: Patients, no, except children going to sleep. Hospital staff,



Doug Meuwissen

only at meetings and get-togethers. It's really peculiar, because we really lose touch with the humor part of things, since the songs quit being funny for us years ago. Then we go out and sing the songs, and people laugh — I'm always a little surprised by it.

SCV Press: What is the ultimate goal of *The Laryngospasms*? And how did that name come about?

Leyh: The ultimate goal of the band is simply to have fun, and to provide a medium with which to offer relief from the tension that typically characterizes our profession. The name comes from a laryngospasm, which is an involuntary closure of the vocal cords (an untoward side-effect of light anesthesia) that is characterized by a squeaky, "crowing" sound. We thought for five guys who can't sing very well, it would be most appropriate.

SCV Press: How big is the group's "catalog" and how many originals do you have?

Leyh: We have two albums out, which have perhaps 23 or 24 tunes, but I think it's fair to say we have

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— Rich Leyh



Gary Cozine

another album's worth that we just haven't recorded yet. All of our songs are originals (that is, our lyrics to other folk's music). There is one notable exception, however: when we sang for the American College of Surgeons, it seemed very appropriate to perform a well-known parody, "The Colorectal Surgeon Song," originally performed by Canadians Bowser & Blue. It's hilarious and went over quite well.

SCV Press: What do your wives/kids think of the group?

Leyh: The wives tolerate it. It's

time away from the family, of course, which is not always popular, particularly when practice is in the evening, when the kids need to have the evening dinner-homework-bath-bed routine done. We are all married and all have kids, so we share the same struggles in that regard. If I were to ask one of my daughters "What do you think of Daddy's singing group?" they'd probably say something like "Uh...it's okay. Can you move? You're blocking the TV."