

Man's voice an instrument of peace

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By Kathy Hanks - The Hutchinson News - khanks@hutchnews.com

HESSTON - President-elect Barack Obama might want to consider having Tony Brown sing at his inauguration in January.

Brown's deep baritone voice could help soothe hard feelings between Democrats and Republicans.

It would resound through the sea of people gathered in front of the nation's capitol and quickly melt hearts.

Promoting peace and goodwill through his singing, Brown views music as a metaphor for harmony.

Last year in Belfast, Ireland, he brought together two archrivals, the IRA and Ulster Defense Association, and engaged them with singing.

"It was a fine example of the power of music," said Brown, who performed with Irish folk singer Tommy Sands. "It was a first meeting of its kind, and these two groups continue to meet. I always want to reach across divides and share the oneness that we have."

Just back at Hesston College in early December after six months researching and singing in Japan and China, Brown is the college's artist-in-residence and will be teaching sociology classes during spring semester.

He came to Hesston in 2000 from the University of Washington in Seattle. When he lived in the big city, his world seemed smaller than it does now in the small town of Hesston, just north of Newton. That's because the college allows him a flexible schedule permitting him to tour the globe singing.

"I moved to a smaller community and my world exploded," Brown said.

In the past year, he founded the not-for-profit charitable organization the "Peacing it Together Foundation." He's excited about the potential the organization has in making a difference in people's lives in places of strife, war and despair. The donations will allow Brown to continue and expand his work, and also make it possible to involve other musicians in the peacemaking efforts.

He has experienced the miracle of music in his own life.

"Singing was a way in," Brown said of his childhood. Raised in inner city Pittsburgh, Pa., when he was eight years old his family bought a farm and he found himself the only black child in a rural school.

The school superintendent saw that Brown had a good voice and had him singing every chance he could.

"This was 1956 just after Brown vs. the Board of Education, and music gave me status. It was a tool,

a vehicle."

That vehicle led him to Goshen College, where he majored in psychology, then graduate school to become a licensed psychotherapist.

All the while, he continued taking voice lessons from a world-class opera singer.

"I still go for a tune-up on my voice," Brown said. His teacher is now 81 years old.

With his performances in such political hot spots as Palestine, Uganda and Bosnia, Brown helps the people focus on how we're all one in the family of humanity.

He performs a repertoire that includes everything from musical theatre to African-American spirituals.

Thinking back to the young boy he was more than 50 years ago, Brown finds it amazing how his music has evolved - bringing people together across divides of religion, ethnicity, nationality, race and culture.

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