Energetic boys add some punch to teacher's morning

By NANCY SMIRL JORGENSEN

The fluctuating hormone levels that occur throughout my day make for a roller-coaster ride that begins at 6:30 a.m. and doesn't crash to a halt until well past lunch. Although I am a woman with college-age children, these hormone levels that affect me so personally have nothing to do with my own physiology. They have more to do with the 65 adolescent boys who enter my classroom every day at 8:45 a.m.

Unlike regular classroom teachers who manage a full class of 25 to 30 students, I greet choir classes that range from a small ensemble of 50 to a large concert choir of 150. While some of the classes consist of mixed-voice choirs, beginning choirs meet in like-voiced groups. A gaggle of girls greets me at 7:15 with great enthusiasm and a desire to achieve, but the mob of 65 freshman and sophomore boys that invades the classroom at 8:45 causes the most havoc.

They bring with them testosterone levels in abundance and in evidence.

Competition governs much of our operating procedure. When the boys are sluggish, we only need to invent a contest. How high can you go? How low can you go? Who can sing the loudest? Baritones? Tenors? Basses? These are competitions where physical size is irrelevant, a plus at the freshman level where boys come in all sizes. The largest boy could easily pick up the smallest, and on occasion that maneuver is attempted.

We have discovered that boys are keen to win a competition, and the only experience better than trouncing a peer is winning a contest with the teacher. They are unfailing victors during the first week of September. In an attempt to learn all 65 names of the Baritone Chorale members (and the balance of names in our choir program of 400-plus students) we challenge these boys to a timed game of "Who can name the baritones?" While I can usually call up the right name for each face, the boys who challenge me can do it with much greater speed.

When not straining to be the supreme singer of the day, our boys are expert at entertaining themselves. Many singers spend hall hours in the choir room. The discovery of costumes in storage provided at least one hour of entertainment for three homework-needey men. Not satisfied to simply play dress-up, these men treated the women's choir to a fashion show: one in tuxedo tails, one in a silver dress (flung jauntily from the neck, but not really worn on the body), one in a bright blue choir robe. Testosterone breeds a thirst for attention!

Just when it is easy to think these boys are all rough and tumble, they reveal a truly human and compassionate side. A memory from 2003, just a few hours after the last day of classes, when we lost one of our Baritone Chorale members to an illness that he had fought for 15 years. Since classes were dismissed for the summer and we had no way to communicate with the class as a whole, one of the boys placed many sad phone calls to ask for the choir's help. Four days later, a strong contingent of singers all in suits and ties collected at the funeral home to sing one last song for their friend who loved so much to sing with them.

The idea for this choir was conceived so boys could perform without the interference and distraction of girls. Indeed, it has been successful. Minus females, our boys sing with abandon. They love to sing. make no excuses for it and have discovered the full range of their abilities. At first hesitant to use their falsetto voices (those very high notes that are actually in the soprano range), they now tell us, "I don't sing as well unless we do that false-
to-warm-up. Can we start with that?" Singing in solid three-part harmony, our men perform every style of music from barbershop quartets (including choreography) to musical theater songs to Renaissance carols.

These boys are typical high school men. They test the limits of the classroom, they turn every possible occasion into a contest, and their physical contact with each other is a push and a punch. They routinely exhibit adolescent male behavior, but since that includes a love of music, a desire to excel, and an exuberant approach to performing, bring on the men!