Divisions abound in statehouses. Republicans on one side of the aisle, Democrats on the other. Conservatives vs. liberals. House and Senate. Yet, if you look beyond the obvious, you’ll find invisible strings that connect lawmakers: a shared love of making music, a surprising family history with the same Founding Father, a childhood linked to the same small town.

A Love of Singing

When Vermont Representative Mitzi Johnson (D) was an eighth-grader, her new piano teacher asked her what kind of music she liked to play. She had been taking lessons for nine years, and it was the first time any of her teachers had posed that question.

“With his help, I found music that I loved, and I found a way to love music. That’s the biggest gift I can give to the people who want to be part of our group: to help them find a way to love singing together, so we can find a way to make this connection in what can be a very contentious profession,” Johnson says.

The group she refers to is the Statehouse Singers, a collection of 25 or so lawmakers, staffers and the occasional lobbyist united by a love of singing.

The House has a tradition of daily devotions, which can be performed by anyone from religious leaders and Vermont artists to children’s groups singing the state song, Johnson says.

For years, Johnson and a handful of colleagues got together on Wednesday nights for sing-alongs around the piano. “One of us, I think it was Alison Clarkson, said we should put together a devotional. That was six or seven years ago. We probably started with the state song, a beautiful song called ‘These Green Mountains,’” says Johnson, whose musical background made her the group’s conductor.

Mark Wolf is NCSL’s publications editor.
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About a month into the 2015 session, Fred Baser, a first-term Republican representative from Bristol, responded to the Statehouse Singers’ callout.

“I’ve sung off and on throughout my life in choirs and school and always enjoyed it, so I went to practice,” Baser says. “The state archivist is a bass, and I stood alongside him, and the clerk of the committee I’m on sings too.

“We get together when we can; sometimes early in the morning, lunchtime, whenever we can catch a half-hour practice here and there. Mitzi is a great pianist and she’s just delightful. Everyone takes it seriously and we usually sound terrible right up until the day before, and then things seem to fall into place. If you follow good direction and hit your notes, it comes out fine. When you sing as a group, one person’s little mistake is generally covered up quite nicely by the others.”

Baser says being a part of the Statehouse Singers is “a good way to connect with other legislators. The bipartisanship is kind of cool. It’s always good to get to know people on the opposite side of issues from you.”

Truth be told, music helped bridge a gap between Baser and Johnson. He won his seat by defeating an incumbent who was a personal friend of Johnson’s and someone with whom she worked closely. As fate would have it, Baser is a bass and some of the Statehouse Singers’ basses did not survive the election.

“He has some great questions, and he made me think about the budget process,” Johnson says. “It’s a gift to have my thinking questioned and challenged. He has some great business experience and we were able to have some good offline communication about what we spend money on and how things work, conversations that probably wouldn’t have happened without us having some different form of shared experience.

“What singing does very strongly is to open up conduits between people. It builds relationships, and this business is all about understanding people, knowing who you can go to for information, who you can talk to. You’re able to build common ground with other people,” says Johnson, “so talking about the harder stuff becomes easier.”

“We broadcast an email that says, ‘Everybody come and join us,’ and we probably do six hours of rehearsal to put something together,” she says. “It’s bipartisan—we get legislators and staff and members of the administration. We’re hoping to rope in someone from the judicial branch. We pick a song that is pretty neutral politically, something that has either to do with Vermont or just working together.”

A recent choice, “Turn the World Around,” by Harry Belafonte, included the lyrics, “We come from the mountain, living on the mountain / Go back to the mountain, turn the world around.”

“I got the idea from Counterpoint, a wonderful group of a cappella singers in Vermont,” Johnson says. “They sing this song, and we’ve done their arrangement of the Vermont state song as well. The message was really fun and upbeat, and the arrangement is fabulous. It was one of the most challenging pieces we’ve done. It has a five-quarter calypso rhythm. We had a few percussionists to fill it out a little. It was rhythmically difficult, and I needed something besides my flailing arms.”

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dots. But it’s that Caribbean heritage that ties the McEachin family to Hamilton.

“My first name is Aston and my grandfather was Aston Hamilton, a Presbyterian minister in the Richmond area for 40 or 50 years,” McEachin says. “He was born and raised on St. Kitts [where Hamilton lived before coming to New York] and, as the story goes, we are of that lineage of Hamilton. It’s on his mother’s side, but it’s not that refined as it was passed on to me. We are a Caribbean Sea and a couple of generations refined as it was passed on to me. We are a mulatto, a mixture of both white and black, so it certainly fits. But at some time those writings disappear.”

Petersen’s ties to Hamilton also come from his mother’s side. She is descended from Hamilton’s wife, Elizabeth Schuyler.

“He married into the Schuyler family in upstate New York, and that family went on to become very prominent,” Petersen says. Several of Petersen’s relatives, including his sister, bear the Schuyler name.

Both Petersen and McEachin admire Hamilton’s legacy.

“He came to us as a young man, fought under Washington at Yorktown and was one of the early proponents of having a central banking system and a standardized treasury,” Petersen says.

McEachin sees a strong connection between his views and Hamilton’s. “I would have supported a central bank and a more centralized government and would have had the same arguments with Thomas Jefferson as he did. Whether that’s imprinted in our DNA, I don’t know.”

Hamilton’s portrait on the $10 bill doesn’t betray any African ancestry “but one can hardly blame him for trying to keep that secret given the time he grew up in,” says McEachin.

A Shared History

As Republican leaders in the Arkansas legislature, Speaker of the House Jeremy Gillam and Senate President Pro Tempore Jonathan Dismang share a number of core values. Few, however, go back quite as far as “Go Badgers!” pride.

Gillam and Dismang were only three years apart at Beebe High School in the 1990s and both credit the school and the Beebe community as major influences on their lives and on their decisions to go into public service.

The town of Beebe had around 3,000 folks when they were growing up. It has more than doubled since then as a bedroom community 25 minutes from Little Rock.

“Our town was very community-service-oriented and I think that really imprinted on me and Jonathan as well. Growing up, we had constant examples of service and it made an impression on how we approach life and public service,” Gillam says.

So connected was Dismang to his community that he brought a number of teachers, administrators and coaches from the high school to his first campaign announcement.

“We campaigned on completely different issues, but we talked about what would be best for our district.”

—Arkansas Senate President Pro Tempore Jonathan Dismang

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term limit in six years. Instead, Dismang announced he was going to seek a Senate seat and urged Gillam to run for the House.

“I thought I was going to have six years, and it turned out to be more like six months,” Gillam says.

The two frequently campaigned together.

“We had a lot of conversations back and forth about what might be the best approach to a particular event and messaging,” Dismang says. “We campaigned on completely different issues, but we talked about what would be best for our district.”

They say their shared backgrounds have helped make them strong leadership partners.

“We both understand each other really well and know how we operate,” Dismang says. “We’ve set up a very open line of communication for what is happening.”