

To Greater Heights

In 1957, the whole world was looking upward. The Space Race was going full tilt, and the Soviet Union had just leapt ahead with the launch of Sputnik, the first man-made rocket to make it to space, on November 7. Dreams of leaving the ground were common; but for Gene Wilson and Bob Kalua, two students in Angwin, California, those dreams took an unusual form.

Gene and Bob shared a deep love for acrobatics. They checked out any circus acts and strongman routines they could, and soon developed their own two-man balancing act, which they performed whenever possible. They dreamed, however, of having a full-fledged acrobatic team, and in 1959, that dream began to become a reality. By this point, Gene was at Loma Linda and Bob was at Pacific Union College, but during breaks Bob would visit and they would work on digging out a space with hand shovels on a neighboring hillside to build a practice area for a whole team. This team, they decided, would be called the Gymnics – a combination of “gymnastics” and “Sputnik,” the gravity-defying satellite.

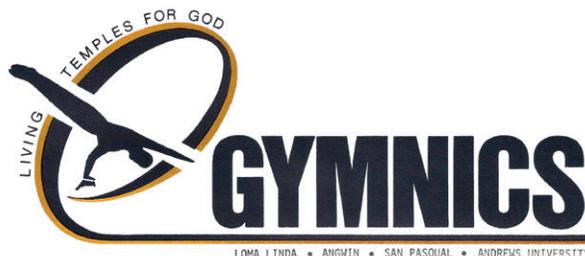
In 1960, Bob’s Gymnics were asked to perform for the North American Youth Congress in Atlantic City, New Jersey. They were a huge hit, and audience members took their enthusiasm back to schools across North America, which soon started establishing acrobatics programs of their own. Bob coached the Gymnics in Angwin until 1966, at which point he moved to teach at San Pasqual Academy in Escondido, California, and took the team with him. Two years later,

he received an invitation from Farrel Brizendine, an old friend who was now the department chair of physical education at Andrews University: bring the Gymnics to Berrien Springs.

Contrary to popular belief, gymnastics had already been happening at Andrews—and many other Adventist schools—for the better part of two decades. Instructors taught beam, rings, high bar, vault, ground tumbling and trampoline to men’s and women’s gym classes. In 1951, a biology student and former Army Cadet named Winfield Hardy formed the EMC Tumblers. Among the inaugural members were Jim Keeney, Reid Tait and Glen Henderson, all of whom had children or grandchildren eventually become Gymnics.

When Farrel Brizendine joined the physical education faculty in 1964, he took over teaching gymnastics classes and brought women onto the EMC Tumblers, dubbing them the Andrews University Gymnastics Team in honor of the school’s new name. He introduced more acrobats to the team, and they began to tour throughout the Lake Union. By 1968, though, he was overwhelmed by coaching, teaching and now being chair of physical education. That’s when he called up Bob Kalua and asked for his help. The Gymnics and the Andrews University Gymnastics Team merged into one, and the Gymnics as we know them today were born.

The Gymnics held their first home show to resounding applause in the spring of



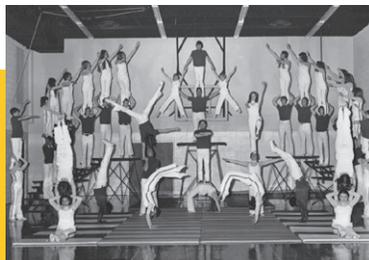
The original Gymnics logo was created as a combination of “gymnastics” and “Sputnik”—with a list of the places where the team has been located through the years

1969, and that summer they traveled to the World Youth Congress in Zurich, Switzerland to perform for more than 20,000 Adventist young people. The following year, more than 200 people auditioned for 45 slots on the team. In the summer of 1970, the Gymnics toured throughout the Midwest for eight weeks, and during the school year they used their shows for more local ministry. On one notable occasion, they performed at the world’s largest walled prison in Jackson, Michigan. A prisoner sent them a letter after the show telling them that their routine had led to his conversion to Christianity: “I saw what should be listed as the Most Greatest Show on Earth,” he wrote. “If Christians are as happy as those young people are then that is what I want!”

In 1971, members of the Gymnics joined forces with gymnasts from Adventist schools across the country to form the Gymnares for Christ, a temporary 32-person team that would travel across North America for 90



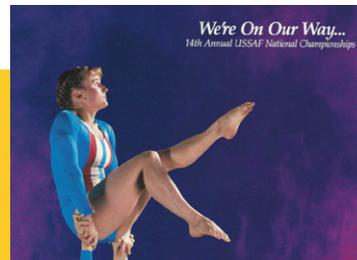
The first home show at Andrews University was held in 1969 and some of the team posed in front of the James White Library



The second year at Andrews University, more than 200 people auditioned for 45 slots on the team



In 1979 the Gymnics toured Europe for six weeks, posing here in front of the Eiffel Tower in Paris, France



In 1989 the Andrews University Gymnics helped to host the Sports Acrobatic National Championship

THE GYMNICS LEGACY

days, covering 18,315 miles, doing 138 shows, and sharing values of devotion to Christ and healthy living wherever they went. For many team members, it was the trip of a lifetime.

Over the years that followed the Gymnics thrived, traveling far and wide and gaining popularity in the church and the local area. Apart from faithful coach Bob Kalua, they were under the direction of Dan Klein from 1975–76, Ernie Stevens in 1980, and Franz Martinez from 1982–1983. They performed for audiences of thousands, volunteered at Camp AuSable, and in 1979 toured Europe for six weeks. They soon began to see exposure outside the Adventist community as well: they performed a routine for 15,000 spectators during the 1987 Special Olympics Sports Spectacular in South Bend, Indiana, and helped host the Sports Acrobatic National Championship at Andrews in 1989.

Sharon Aka, who started on the team in 1974 when she was in the 7th grade and stayed for ten years, remembers many of the Gymnics' high points fondly. "One of my best memories," she says, "was the six-week Europe trip during the summer of 1979. This is when I discovered that I loved to travel. Hands-down the best experience of Gymnics, though, was meeting my future husband Tim on the team!"

Over the years, the Gymnics have also done many mission trips: to the Dominican Republic in 1982, Puerto Rico in 1983, and Coach Kalua's homeland of Hawaii in 1985. In the 1990s they visited Haiti, Trinidad and the Philippines.

The Gymnics' 40th anniversary in 1999

brought another milestone, however, that led to questions about the team's future: Coach Kalua's retirement. With a special Millennium performance imminent, Brian Curry stepped in as interim coach, serving from 2000–2002 and 2005–2006. "The most exciting thing about being the coach," he says, [was] taking youthful energy and creating something that [would] inspire people of all ages to live healthfully." Another Hawaiian native and former Gymnic Paul Chong became coach from 2002–2005, but when he left the administration found themselves again looking for a coach who could make a long term commitment to the Gymnics.

The answer to their prayers was Christian Lighthall, who joined the Gymnics in 2006 and served until 2013. He introduced aspects of cheerleading to the Gymnics, taking them to the literal heights that Bob Kalua and Gene Wilson had dreamt of so many years ago.

Today, the Gymnics train, perform and spread the gospel under the leadership of Eric Paddock, the son-in-law of former Gymnics Don and June Mathis. While some things have changed—the floral muumuus and matching suits, thankfully, are a thing of the past!—the team's mission remains the same. Nowhere was this clearer than at this spring's Gymnic Reunion, from April 10–12, 2015, which saw former Gymnics reminiscing with old friends and celebrating the team's legacy together. "Gymnics have this almost indefinable thing that creates a sense of belonging," Sharon Aka reflects. "It's a bond that truly stands the test of time. Once a Gymnic, always a Gymnic."

"We have always been a team that focuses on building relationships. We strive to be missionaries in the guise of gymnasts," says Eric Paddock. "We provide anti-drug and wellness rallies at middle schools and high schools, vespers and church services at academies, and clinics for aspiring gymnasts. We use the talents given to us to perform hour-long shows for academies, public school rallies, youth groups, and other venues supporting healthy lifestyles and looking for opportunities to share Christ."

"To be a light for Christ is always our focus," says Andrew Osano, who has served as assistant coach for the past four years. While renowned for their acrobatic abilities, the Gymnics end every performance with a "Tribute to God"—a portrayal of Biblical history from creation to the resurrection of Christ. In addition to the outreach component, Osano talks about an "in-reach" element: "We have opportunities to share in each other's burdens and joys. Every Thursday night, we end practice early and have a bit of family time. We sit in a large circle and give our praises and prayer requests then we all link hands and pray. For many people on the team, Gymnics is a family away from home. We spend so much time together both on and off the mats."

With such a rich legacy, Paddock has high hopes for the future. "It is a great honor to be able to continue here at Andrews University," Paddock says. "The year behind us was a success in my eyes, and the year ahead of us is looking great. I can't wait to see what God has in store for us from here on out." ■



Each home show in the 1990s had an artistic backdrop created for it



The 2000s were a time of transition for the Gymnics



The current 2015 team performed for the Indianapolis Pacers half-time show



Many former Gymnics enjoyed the reunion held during 2015 Homeshow weekend, April 10–12, 2015