



FEATURES

# The Soul and Voice of Kenny G.

An electric-shop foreman's kindness and "buttery" bass light up the University community

*Kenneth Grayson (Photo: Ricardo Barros)*

**By Catherine Mallette '84**

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It's 5 p.m. on a Tuesday, and in the crypt of the University Chapel, the Chapel Choir's rehearsal begins right on time. Penna Rose leads a vigorous warmup, taking the group of almost 70 through a labyrinth of scales. The choir's singers stand tall. Almost all are students, wearing tank tops, shorts, and sandals on this warm spring day. At his place in the bass section is Kenneth Grayson, sharply dressed in black trousers, black dress shirt, and a black-and-orange repp tie, topped by a V-neck black vest. This is where he's been for almost every rehearsal, twice a week, for 25 years.

Kenny Grayson has been a part of the Princeton community since 1971, when he began working in the facilities department's real-estate office. Today he's a foreman in the University's electric/elevator shop, which is where he began this Tuesday, at his desk before 6 a.m., ready to greet the men on his team — “my guys” — as they arrived for their 7 a.m. start time. Two of his guys were on vacation, and Grayson had been stepping in “to fill the holes.”

“It's what I do,” he says.

Fixing electrical systems, performing endless preventive maintenance, and managing a team of 22 is, as Chapel Choir president Eliza Davis '17 says, “not a job that lends itself to interaction with students,” and yet “he goes the extra mile all the time for us.”

How Grayson took a job and turned it into a lifetime of service to the Princeton community — along the way earning University accolades and using his remarkable gifts to bring both gravitas and beauty to moments of shared joy and grief — is a story that begins with a Baptist minister in Trenton.

Grayson grew up in Chicago, learning the electrical trade at a vocational school there. In the 1950s, his great-grandfather, the founding pastor of Union Baptist Church in Trenton, started to go blind. Grayson's dad, also a minister (as was Grayson's grandfather), asked him to help out. He said yes.

When he came East, Grayson connected with a cousin living in New York: Carl A. Fields, who later would become assistant dean of the college, the first African American dean at any Ivy League school. The Carl A. Fields Center for Equality and Cultural Understanding is named in his honor. It was Fields who suggested that Grayson work at Princeton. All the while, Grayson pursued his interest in music, singing in church choirs, including a few groups in Trenton, and in Princeton's gospel choir.

And he started to view Princeton as “my home away from home” — a home that returned his affection. Among Grayson's awards are some of the University's top honors, including his 1997 President's Achievement Award, recognizing staff members for exceptional dedication, outstanding contributions, and exemplary service. But those who know him best say it's the quieter, everyday connections he makes that show the true spirit of Kenny G., as he's affectionately known.

*“What is a soul? It's like electricity — we don't really know what it is, but it's a force that can light a room.”*

*— Ray Charles*

Kenny sang a solo at one of the dinners in Portugal,” recalls Davis, talking about the Chapel Choir's 10-day trip to Portugal last January. “We were all crying. It was so gorgeous.” She admits that she and her friends didn't know he could sing like that.

She pauses. “And we sing with him every week!”

Davis talks about how, on that trip, Grayson was “such a mentor.” When people would start splitting into groups for lunch, he would “wait to make sure everyone had someone to go with,” she says. On Valentine's Day, she says, he brought little boxes of chocolates for all the women in the choir. When he sees choir members around campus, he always stops his golf cart to say hello.

“When my grandfather passed away, I said a prayer for him in the Chapel service,” Davis adds. Grayson reached out to her as she left the Chapel that day: “He said, ‘Eliza, I’m here for you. We can be your family. You know we love you.’”

In his 2012 book *Keeping Faith at Princeton: A Brief History of Religious Pluralism at Princeton and Other Universities*, former Dean of the Chapel Frederick H. Borsch ’57 wrote about Grayson’s behind-the-scenes work at Princeton after the attacks on 9/11. It was Grayson’s singing during that tough time that led the Class of 2002 to make him an honorary classmate (he’s also an honorary member of the Class of ’71). Joe Kochan ’02 introduced Grayson on Class Day that year, noting not only his ability to help students with “Herculean tasks” for their events, but also his performance at the 9/11 memorial service: a moving rendition of “Amazing Grace,” “reminding us all just how much it is that we depend on each other for support and strength.”

Dean of Religious Life Alison Boden puts it simply: “He gets energy from being of service to other people. His heart is set on serving.” Boden happily gushes about Grayson, who staffs the sound and light board for the Chapel services on Sundays and sings with his “buttery” bass at campus events throughout the year: “We all turn to Kenny G. when we need a song.”

Back in the Chapel crypt later in the spring, a small group gathers for a luncheon to hear choir members talk about the trip to Portugal. Grayson is their unofficial photographer, and a slideshow with all of his 1,700 tour photos runs on a big screen.

He speaks briefly, focusing on the students: “Each one of these individual students brings something unique. We love them individually, and I definitely love them all collectively.”

Director Rose publicly thanks Grayson for all he does for the choir, revealing more in a private conversation: There was the time a student was slated to sing a solo but discovered his pants didn’t quite fit —

Grayson called the local Jos. A. Bank store and got him a new pair. She uncovers a shoeshine kit in the choir's closet. Grayson had it made, complete with the University crest, and teaches choir members how to use it. On the choir's biennial international tours, he takes the young men to hat shops and helps them decode the secrets of haberdashery. "If the choir looks good at all, it's because of him," she says.

Grayson deflects the compliments. "To me," he says, "working is fun. It's my life. We're all like family here."

A heart attack years ago — "back when they commissioned the new stadium" — gave him additional perspective. "It makes you humble," he says. "The Big General has the key. You get a second chance." He was back at work after three weeks, and says he'll keep working as long as he feels useful and can do what needs to be done.

Today, he says, "I travel a lot. I sing a lot." In his free time, he goes to events at McCarter Theatre and Richardson Auditorium, concerts by the Glee Club and the University orchestra, and he spends time with his three daughters and four grandchildren. (While he declines to say how old he is, he notes that his oldest daughter will turn 50 this year.) He shops at the Columbus flea and farmers' market, and twice a week allows himself his favorite hazelnut coffee at Small World.

But most of all, he commits to a job he calls "miraculous."

Going the extra mile is all in a day's work for Kenny G. Life is service.

"That's what I do," he says.

*Catherine Mallette '84 is director of editorial services at HarperCollins Publishers' Princeton office.*

**VIDEO: Kenneth Grayson sings "America the Beautiful" during Princeton's 2016 Veterans Day observance.**

*Courtesy Princeton University, via Twitter*

**Kenneth Grayson, [#PrincetonU](#) shop foreman, sings a rendition of "America the Beautiful" during our [#VeteransDay](#) observance. [pic.twitter.com/xl3b3htvSF](https://pic.twitter.com/xl3b3htvSF)**

— Princeton University (@Princeton) [November 11, 2016](#)