MORAGA -- Julie Ford's job title, Lecturer in Choral Directing at Saint Mary's College, is wrong.

That's far too stern and stuffy to describe the Pied Piper-like glitz and glamour of her purpose, which has everything to do with lyricism and little to do with delivering lectures from a podium. As director of the new SMC Glee Club, Ford is helping an enthusiastic ensemble of young college singers become a swinging, twirling, head-turning vocal masterpiece.

"The idea (for glee club) came from students and me. We were discussing ways to recruit for the Chamber Ensemble," Ford explains.

Believing the advanced choral program needed an entry level choir, Ford and a group of advisory students turned to pop music.

"You can simplify and customize pop music and still produce a high quality product," Ford says, adding that TV's "Glee" and her own background in jazz helped make the idea a win-win proposal.

Ford was originally hired by the college in September 2010 as a choral lecturer for one class. There were 10 people enrolled, making it more like a vocal training class than a choir.

Today, just more than a year later, there are 50 students and two performing ensembles. Ford turned away 20 students at the fall auditions, which were in themselves a new initiative.

"My gosh, when I first formed it there was no audition and it was an established mode of operating that you didn't have to come to all the rehearsals," she exclaims. "I endured that for about a month and then I started talking about setting higher standards."

Those standards led the Glee Club all the way from their cramped quarters in Art Room 105 -- fire laws prevent the choir from bringing in chairs, forcing singers to sit on the floor for rehearsals -- to a gold medal at last May's Inturkulture International Choral Competition in Reno, Nev.

"They adored our choir," Ford remembers. "They sought us out between workshops. They were spiritually, emotionally moved by our singers."

She doesn't speculate as to why response from the judges went beyond favorable into something almost spiritual, preferring to attribute the positive reception to earthly matters like simple, strong technique and vocal excellence. The most she'll say about the "a ha" factor is that SMC's ethics produce students with character and commitment. She hints that their faith in a higher power is the distinguishing factor, but stops just short of naming it.

Ford is immensely proud of and, perhaps, a little frightened by the program's growth. She attributes much of the success to the student leaders, support from the college faculty and the work of assistant director and accompanist, Sharon Lee Kim.

"I couldn't do this without her," she says. "And the faculty -- they actually come to the concerts. I see them out there rooting on the kids and I haven't seen that in other faculties."

Ford admits that handling the explosion of interest has been like riding a bucking bronco.

"It's asking so much in such a short amount of time that there is inevitable strain. College leadership is doing this very graciously, but it's obviously quite a stretch."

She's speaking, of course, about money. But in her doggedly determined fashion, she finds the silver lining, noting
how the limited resources push the students to assume responsibility for rehearsing, fundraising and supporting each other.

The SMC Glee Club has been invited to July's World Choir Games, held in Cincinnati. This is the first time the international competition will be held in the U.S. and the event is a cultural exchange, as much as a celebration of choral music. The Moraga contingent will present four customized arrangements.

"They encourage you to be in your country's uniforms, which is a bit of a puzzle in the U.S.,” Ford laughs.

With a selection from "West Side Story," the choir will wear leather and jean jackets, representing the song's two gangs. Tributes to Whitney Houston's angelic voice and Michael Jackson's beyond-silky maneuverings will come in two other selections. And to stretch the students' range, "Help" by the Beatles will round out the performance.

"These students are completely committed, so anything I ask them to do, there's no resistance," Ford says. "The more I challenge them, the more empowered they seem to be. I think we'll do very well, so we're going for it."

SMC Glee Club and Chamber Singers' Spring Concert
WHEN: Sunday, May 6, 4 p.m.; Tuesday, May 8, 8 p.m.
WHERE: Saint Mary's College chapel, near the center of the Moraga campus
SUGGESTED DONATION: $10 general; $5 SMC community; $8 seniors and non-SMC students.