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Voices of Unity program 'much more than a choir'

Current, past members set for reunion concert

By Kevin Kilbane of The News-Sentinel

Having seen the Voices of Unity choir perform previously and loving it, Jordan Applegate went to the group's concert and registration event in fall 2002 to check out joining.

They asked him to sing and, when he finished, young people in the choir gave him a standing ovation.

"It meant a lot," said Applegate, who then was a 15-year-old high school student.

He and other Voices of Unity alumni will rejoin the group for an evening of soulful musical stylings at the 10th Year Reunion Spring Concert at 6 p.m. June 26 in the Memorial Coliseum Expo Center.

Character through arts

Marshall White, the choir director and founder of the Unity Performing Arts Foundation, started the choir in 2000.

"It was a vision I began to receive in my dreams in 1993 to start an arts organization focused on developing young people into leaders and professionals," White said.

He spent several years writing out a detailed plan for how the organization and program would work. The entire vision, which all falls under the umbrella of the Unity Performing Arts Foundation, includes not only a youth choir, but programs for young people in five other skills — creative writing (started in 2008) and yet-to-be-launched training in public speaking, drama, dance and instrumental music.

The arts are the hook to get youngsters interested, White said, but the goal is to develop character and academic and social skills.

"You have to build the person as well as shape the talent," he said. "You can't just shape the talent and not build the person."

Gold-medal sound

The approximately 120 youngsters in the Voices of Unity Choir are ages 6-19, White said. They represent an ethnic cross-section of the community, as evidenced by the 19 ZIP codes in which they live.

The choir normally practices noon-3 p.m. Saturdays and 4-7 p.m. Sundays, but rehearsal time increases as they prepare for a major concert.

Older students who have aged out of the program, as well as adults, can serve as mentors who help choir members with singing or life issues, White said.

The choir focuses on music relevant to today's young people.

MORE INFORMATION

Soulful reunion

What: Voices of Unity choir and alumni will perform at a 10th Year Reunion Spring Concert.

When: 6 p.m. June 26

Where: Memorial Coliseum Expo Center, 4000 Parnell Ave.

Cost: Adults, \$15 in advance, and \$18 day of show; ages 55 and older, \$10; and free, ages 12 and younger. Tickets available at the coliseum box office, Ticketmaster outlets, www.ticketmaster.com or charge-by-phone at 1-800-745-3000. Churches and organizations serving younger children can call the Unity Performing Arts Foundation office at 481-6719 to reserve tickets for groups of youth ages 12 and younger. Parking is \$4 for the main lot, and \$8 for the preferred lot.

Notes:

◆Unity Performing Arts Foundation (UPAF) fundraising gala planned for June 22 has been postponed.

◆For more information about the Voices of Unity choir or to inquire about a child joining, call 481-6719.

◆UPAF plans to open an arts academy for youth this summer at Renaissance Pointe YMCA, 2323 Bowser Ave. Instruction offered will include piano, violin, choral, vocals, dance and creative writing. For information, call 481-6719 or the YMCA at 447-4567.

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Their repertoire, which White describes as "soulful choral music," ranges from jazz, blues and gospel to rap, rock and pop.

The choir used that style and skill to win two gold medals and the Gospel and Spiritual category championship during the sixth World Choir Games last July in Shaoxing, China. In recognition of that achievement, the choir also has been named grand marshal for next month's Fort Wayne Newspapers Three Rivers Festival parade.

Sense of empowerment

White and his staff expect a lot from choir members, but successes are celebrated.

Just as he experienced at registration, the choir still gives a standing ovation to members who have achieved success or really pushed themselves to step outside their box, said Applegate, who earned a bachelor's degree in business at Ball State University and who now works as Unity Performing Arts Foundation's youth choral program supervisor.

"I think it gives them a sense of ownership in the program and that everyone in the program is on their side," he said.

Those feelings, along with what they learn about staying focused, leadership and good character, help empower young people to succeed in college and in careers, he and White said. That sense of being part of something great also keeps alumni coming back, during breaks from college as well as for events such as the reunion concert.

"We are much more than (just) a choir," Applegate said.



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