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# Voices of Unity is globally linked

**Mark Hunter** | For The Journal Gazette

Next time you see TiErika Hunt at a Voices of Unity concert, ask her something in Mandarin. If you don't know Mandarin, well, just ask her to tell you something in Mandarin. Chances are pretty good her face will light up and the next thing out of her mouth will sound exotic.

Hunt is a seven-year member of the Voices of Unity Choir, the Fort Wayne-based vocal ensemble that traveled to Shaoxing, China, last July to compete in the sixth World Choir Games and returned home with two gold medals.

Visiting China had long been a dream of Hunt's. Now she knows what it's like to have a dream come true.

"The thing that really stuck with me about the China trip was the fact we were going there," Hunt said. "I always had a strong interest in the culture and the language. Going there sparked that interest. So now I'm learning Mandarin Chinese, and I plan to go back."

But what also stuck with Hunt was the huge effort it took to raise the money to make the trip possible. And for that she credited the Fort Wayne community.

"We did a lot of fundraising," she said. "We had a lot of people donate. The community was the major help in getting us to China."

Voices of Unity raised about \$400,000 from not only Fort Wayne donors but from donors outside the community as well.

And while counting dollars is a tangible measure of the support a community has for a group like Voices of Unity, the more important standard can't be deposited in a bank.

"The entire effort engaged the community in a way I'd never seen," said Marshall White, founder and director of Voices of Unity. "And not just the Fort Wayne area but the surrounding community came together. That was a unique experience to see. I don't think Fort Wayne and the community know the impact they had on these kids and the impact the kids had on the world."

White said the Voices of Unity Facebook page has had visitors from 19 countries since the China trip.

The support the choir received paid dividends to Fort Wayne in the form of worldwide recognition of what White called "a community treasure."

"Voices of Unity is giving a different perspective to the community," he said. "We're communicating with all aspects of the community. The biggest challenge is to help people see something that has never existed."

Just as the larger community is made up of a wide variety of individuals sharing a particular commonality,



Cathie Rowand | The Journal Gazette

TiErika Hunt's dream of traveling to China came true with the Voices of Unity Choir last year.

Voices of Unity lives and breathes in a similar but smaller way.

"We have kids from 19 different ZIP codes in Voices of Unity," White said. "We have kids from seven racial groups from the community. We focus on communities that are deprived. We have to provide the opportunity for them not to simply help, but to empower them to contribute to the entire community."

The idea of communities in synergy is one former Voices of Unity member Stephanie Woodson understands. Woodson, who remains active with the Unity Performing Arts Foundation, as well as with the choir, recognizes the effect community support has had on the lives of choir members.

"The time and money the community has given to the choir have helped us accomplish the things we have in the past 10 years," Woodson said. "We are world champions after our first time competing on any level. But it's not about a title. It's about showing that great things can and do come out of Fort Wayne, that our youth can represent Fort Wayne in a positive light."

Woodson, who in December graduated from Fisk University in Nashville, Tenn., with a bachelor's degree in psychology, credits Voices of Unity with helping her gain the confidence she needed to pursue her goals.

"I have become someone who is finding their purpose in life and using that purpose to make a better life for myself and those around me," she said. "I don't know what kind of student I would have been in terms of my involvement on campus and my confidence in being able to fulfill those roles without UPAF."

Like Woodson, the Voices of Unity community, which exists within the larger Fort Wayne community, has helped Hunt gain the confidence to not only tackle Mandarin but to reach for her future with excitement.

"Voices of Unity is like a community," she said. "It's a place for kids from different backgrounds to share a lot of moments together. It gives us a lot of opportunities like a regular community and helps us prepare for going out into the world."

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