



Masks on, songs on

Nims sixth-grader Nyjah Hunter performs in the holiday concert. SPECIAL TO THE DEMOCRAT



Choral director Andrew Thompson hopes to inspire students and the community. SPECIAL TO THE DEMOCRAT

Nims' choral director says 'we're learning as we go'

Amanda Karioth Thompson Council on Culture & Arts

Andrew Thompson had a clear vision for what he wanted to accomplish after college. Just over a year into his teaching career, he's already putting his vision into practice. As the new choral director at Nims Middle School, he's building a program from scratch that he hopes will inspire students and the surrounding community. • "Right now, none of my students, with the exception of maybe two, have ever performed, anything, anywhere, not at church, nothing. We're learning as we go and, the fact is, they're doing it," he said.



Andrew Thompson teaches his students to sing with courage and conviction. SPECIAL TO THE DEMOCRAT

Thompson aspires to establish Nims' first show choir. "I want them to be able to sing and dance and get a full immersive experience of not only what it is to perform but also what it takes to put together a show."

About 100 students are currently enrolled in the choir. Due to the pandemic, most of those students are participating remotely which creates challenges that Thompson overcomes digitally. All the music is uploaded to a program that students can access and practice at home. They then submit recordings of themselves to Thompson who gives highly personalized feedback and instruction.

Much of Thompson's initial work focused on creating a culture of trust and mutual respect. "The majority of our students are first

time singers, and they're working to get comfortable with just releasing a sound. With chorus, it's never going to be instant gratification. It's OK if it starts off shaky. You know it will get better. We talked about what makes them feel uncomfortable, what makes them feel left out. They need a safe environment so they can open up their mouth."

Thompson is extremely cautious about the physical safety of his in-person students. He faithfully follows CDC guidelines and seeks out best practices for COVID era choral instruction. "I've been conversing with people in the field to find different safe ways to do it. The biggest thing we stick to is you keep that mask on."

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The new Nims show choir in their first public performance. SPECIAL TO THE DEMOCRAT

Nims

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This commitment to safety was evident in the show choir's first public performance, a digitally presented holiday concert which included two original songs by Thompson. The concert shows the students singing while wearing masks but, for optimum sound quality, their voices were pre-recorded and dubbed into the final version. The Nims dance program was also featured in the performance and rehearsals occurred in separate spaces to keep the students socially distanced. Thompson said, to produce and record a successful show, "there was a lot of modification and learning on the fly."

Nims sixth-grader Nyjah Hunter enjoyed the opportunity to share what she's learned so far. She was immersed in preparing for the concert and said "I'd go home and practice all day and I'd forget about my homework but then I'd remember my homework and I'd think, 'oh my goodness I've been practicing for so long that I forgot.'" Nyjah is impressed with what the group has been able to achieve in a short amount of time and she said "we're sounding very nice, like a group."

She also recognizes that the choir has helped her cope with the isolation and uncertainties brought about by COVID. "Being around my friends relieves my anxiety. Every time I go home, I have anxiety about what's going to happen with the pandemic so singing really helps me."

Thompson confirmed that Nyjah is not alone. "These students are dealing with anxiety," he said. "In life you're going to be in a lot of uncomfortable situations. This pandemic is pretty uncomfortable but you still have to operate."

"I'm faced with teaching a lot of hard lessons through vocal technique and learning how to perform. If anything, the culmination of this semester is just overcoming fear in general. Not a lot of people are going to have the courage to do what these kids are doing. The community needs to see that more often and we need to show it."

To watch the Nims holiday production, visit https://youtu.be/BeQzk7B4U_w.

This article is part of COCA's Creativity Persists collection and highlights how area arts educators are continuing to teach and inspire during the COVID-19 pandemic. Amanda Karioth Thompson is the Assistant Director for the Council on Culture & Arts. COCA is the capital area's umbrella agency for arts and culture (www.tallahasseearts.org).