

Children's Choir energizes, inspires

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Making her way through the hallway from Florida State University's choral office to rehearsal, Suzanne Rita Byrnes came across the 3-year-old sibling of one of her Capital Children's Choir students. Walking up to him, she told him she wanted to teach him something. They held hands and moved up the seven stairs to the choral room, singing the scales — Do, Re, Mi, Fa, So, La, Ti — until, missing a step, they jumped in place for the final Do.

The next week she was inspired when he ran up to her and declared that it was his turn. Jumping up the stairs he sang his scales with self-assurance. The moment inspired and reaffirmed for Byrnes her mission as a music education professor and Director of the Capital Children's Choir, as she prepares the group for their upcoming concert on Monday, Dec. 11.

"It's just precious, and he's not even a formal member, he just comes with his sister," says Byrnes, who favors those who practice music with a full heart. "I prefer listening to people who put some soul and love into their music. Technique is cool, but it doesn't impress me. I don't care if there's a wrong note here or there."

Her journey to the Capital Children's Choir wasn't a conventional one. Byrnes earned her bachelor's in music education from McGill University and a bachelor's in education from Universite d'Ottawa. After teaching choir, band, and orchestra in a French arts high school, she was ready to set the world on fire as a leading lady conductor. Byrnes went back to earn her masters in choral conducting and music education, before a doctorate at Florida State situated her in Tallahassee.

During her time at FSU, Clifford Madsen supervised her degree and placed her with Judy Bowers who was the director of the Children's Choir at the time. Byrnes surprised herself and fell madly in love with the work, and after graduation moved to Kansas City, inspired to start a similar community outreach program. She served as director of the Kansas City Children's Chorus for 12 years before coming back to FSU and taking over her current position.

"It's really a process-oriented program," explains Byrnes. "The role of this choir is to help the children learn how to sing and enjoy music. It only costs \$15 a semester to join and I've given scholarships because I'm not going to turn anyone away."

Originally from Ottawa, Canada, Byrnes says her French Canadian upbringing encouraged music as part of family and friend get-togethers—her mom tapping away at the spoons and everyone gathering around the piano to sing. Byrnes began her formal music education in seventh grade, with the flute in her middle school band.

She felt lucky to have music teachers who challenged the group, bringing them to competitions and eventually winning one and playing at the national arts center. The excitement of that performance had Byrnes hooked, and she continued studying music in high school. When her advisors asked why she didn't want to go into law or physics after graduation, which would make her more money, she answered confidently that music would always make her happy.

"I tell my interns now that if you go into a new job to make sure to bring part of you with that because it's not just about the curriculum or the standards," reflects Byrnes. "Be true to yourself and sing your own



Suzanne Byrnes works with the Capital Children's Choir in preparation for a concert on Monday. SUZANNE BYRNES

If you go

What: Capital Children's Choir Concert presented by the Florida State University College of Music

When: 6:30 p.m., Monday, Dec. 11

Where: Opperman Music Hall, 114 N Copeland St.

Cost: Free

Contact: For more information, call 850-644-3424 or visit <http://music.fsu.edu/>.

song. Don't do something that you're unhappy with."

The uniqueness of the Children's Choir is that it includes a community of kindergarten through 8th-grade students as well as college interns from the School of Music who help to conduct, teach, and manage the logistics of the group. Rehearsing once a week on Mondays, the choir has been around for more than 30 years, and Byrnes is thrilled to carry on the tradition.

Each rehearsal she juggles conducting and teaching the children who vary in age and ability, as well as mentoring her college students in their own conducting and teaching. Fully immersed in the process, she is amazed when these young musicians make connections between concepts and offer unexpected insights.

"We were singing 'Engine, Engine Number Nine' with the 4 and 5-year-olds and I was teaching them about crescendo," says Byrnes. "One child raised their hand and asked what it's called if we speed up our singing so we learned about accelerando. Then the group asked if we could first sing faster, then louder,

then do it with both. I have a couple of little conductors in there, which is really sweet to see."

Their eagerness energizes Byrnes, whose teaching philosophy emphasizes continually learning. She imparts healthy vocal techniques and the choir sings in multiple languages, as well uses music education principles such as solfège and Curwen hand signs to understand music. Byrnes stays animated in her conducting style, communicating with eye contact and facial expressions to embolden her students. She's always happy to witness the college students' experiences and evolution with the choir, recalling her own time as a doctoral student.

"Most of them tell me that they never thought they'd love this so much and that it's so nice to see where music begins," says Byrnes. "For me, that's a win-win situation because everyone is learning. It's really inspiring to see that there are people excited to teach in our elementary schools."

The choir works towards an "informance" rather than a performance, focusing on what has been gained in the process. The different sections are divided by age into the Garnet, Gold, and Seminole choirs, and each performs their own selection. This semester's will include "The Holly and the Ivy," "Blue Waters of the North," and a few holiday songs to fill Opperman Music Hall's with young voices. Though it's a whirlwind experience, Byrnes is always happy with the end result, giving the children a chance to show off how far they've come, and how far they've yet to go.

"On the back of our T-shirt it says that singing is forever," says Byrnes. "I believe that because once you learn how to sing you can go anywhere. You don't need an instrument, you just need your voice."