

‘Everybody has a part’

Singing brings a tingle at Gretchen Everhart winter concert



Matthew LaFollette conducted the group in a spirited rendition of *We Wish You A Merry Christmas*. PHOTOS BY AMANDA THOMPSON

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When we think of a virtuoso, we generally envision a superb pianist or a master of the violin.

Rarely does the term conjure up coconuts, but Tyler Woods’ percussive proficiency, might make you reconsider. During Gretchen Everhart School’s annual winter concert, the 19-year-old student performed a whimsical rendition of “Jingle Bells” and the entire audience sang along. “I was doing the coconuts to make the sound of reindeer paws,” he explained.

Along with 10 other members of the school’s performing arts ensemble, Tyler rang in the season, offering holiday standards like “Deck the Halls” and “Winter Wonderland.” Tyler looks forward to this performance each year and he shared that learning about music “helps me open my voice out and that’s what I like to do.”

Gretchen Everhart School serves students with intellectual disabilities ages 3 to 22. That means the

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Katy McBride performs a solo portion of *White Christmas*.

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school's music therapist, Brenda Rice, has the opportunity to watch the creative development of her students over an extended period of time. This year marks her 31st at Everhart and in that time, she has nurtured hundreds of emerging artists. In her role as the chorus director, Rice coordinates performances for her students regularly but the annual winter concert is a favorite largely because it's a collaborative venture.

When she's not teaching at Everhart, Rice directs the WAVE chorus. WAVE: Widening Adult Vital Experiences, Inc. provides opportunities for social activities, choral performances, community involvement, and life-skills training for adults and teens with developmental disabilities. Many of Rice's former students are now vocalists in that ensemble and they all lent their voices for the winter concert.

"We do that for our holiday production because we like to have a bigger group," said Rice. "You have a variety of qualities of voices and my students can then see what it's like to work together as a larger ensemble." Teamwork is an area of focus in Rice's instructional approach and the skills her students gain in chorus benefit them in every other situation.

"We talk about the things that each and every one of us has to do to make it work. We talk about how important everybody is. Everybody has a part. It's just as in life. Wherever you go, you have to be a part of something larger and you have to do your part. You can't always let people do things for you. We learn how to work together to create beautiful music."

Rice also strives for constant and steady improvement and teaches her students how to provide feedback that's specific and constructive. "We critique ourselves and we learn how to talk about things that maybe are not good yet but how do we make it better. We learn to use positive language so that we're not saying 'oh, that's awful' but we're giving ways in which we can get better together." That's something that Sara Buker values and she has internalized this philosophy.

A member of the WAVE chorus, 30-year-old Buker shared "we try to improve ourselves each and every time we sing." She has performed numerous times and she's proud of the fact that "things are getting better and better." Buker has been singing since she was small and she has no plans to stop anytime soon. "It brings a joy to my heart," she said. "You know that feel-



**Brenda Rice
accompanying
the singers at
Gretchen
Everhart
Christmas
concert.**
AMANDA
THOMPSON

ing you have that's like a tingle? I get that feeling every time that I sing."

Katy McBride, 23, is one of Rice's former students and is now a member of the WAVE chorus. She and Buker sang White Christmas and each performed a solo portion of the iconic song. "Katy is super talented and has a gorgeous voice," said Rice with pride in her eyes. Due to Rice's coaching, coupled with private lessons, McBride's vocal strength and confidence have grown enormously over the years. That's one of the most rewarding parts of Rice's job.

Some of Rice's students may work with her for nearly 20 years and in that time, deep bonds form. That makes it all the more difficult when it's time for them to move on to life's next adventures. Twenty-one-year-old Everhart student, Anfrenee Young will graduate soon and it's bitter-sweet. "I feel kind of sad because this is my last year but I'm coming to WAVE, so that makes me happy," said Young. He added that he will continue to sing because "it shows my love for everyone and that we care for other people. They get my love and they get my voice and I give it to them."

This is exactly what Rice hopes her students to take from their chorus experience. "I want them to feel, when they leave Everhart, that they can go sing in a church choir if they want to, they can sing in the community choir if they want to, or they can sing at WAVE or Pyramid if they want to. I'm super proud of them because I see where they started and where they are now and how much they love music. I know they're going to continue in it, they're not going to stop. The lovely thing is that they don't have to."

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).