



Suzanne Byrnes directs the Honor Chorus.

ONE VOICE

Young Honor Chorus members learn skills for life

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The Chiles High School auditorium recently resonated with the voices of nearly 200 elementary students. Representing 20 schools, these vocalists were part of the 2016 Leon County Elementary Honor Chorus. For the last 16 years, this special program has provided an opportunity for young singers to perform and celebrate their love of music with their teachers, their loved ones and the entire community.

While offering words of encouragement, Superintendent Jackie Pons shared a personal memory with the students. "I love music and I love to sing. When I was in chorus, my teacher, who I loved, used to tell me that I didn't have to sing very loud. It was OK if I kind of kept it quiet. Now that I'm older I wonder if I wasn't a great singer, but I still love it anyway. Keep loving the arts, it's the key to your success."

The Honor Chorus program includes an advocacy speaker, and this year Forest Van Camp was invited to speak about the importance of music education. As a former educator, administrator and school board member, he emphasized what students have to look forward to. "This is not the end for you to participate in chorus. I know that some of you are going to middle school next year, and there are art programs, music programs, band and so much more waiting for you."

One of the most remarkable aspects of the Honor Chorus concert is that, until the morning of the event, the students have never sung together. With 20 schools participating, multiple group

rehearsals are not logistically practical, so much of the preparation occurs in small student ensembles at their respective schools. Students who are interested in being part of Honor Chorus work with their own music teachers to learn these songs before or after school.

Randy Baez, music teacher at DeSoto Trail and co-founder of the Honor Chorus, explained how it all comes together. "I work with my kids in my own style, and the other teachers work with their kids, and they are all ready to do the best of their best. For some of these students, this is the first time they have ever done a concert, and to do it at this magnitude, it's great. The most amazing thing is that these kids have never seen each other. They came this morning for the one group rehearsal, and it's like magic. They opened their mouths and sang and it sounds beautiful."

This magic is due entirely to the dedication and expertise of our local music instructors and the leadership of the concert's choral director. This year, Dr. Suzanne Byrnes took on that role. She is the director of the FSU Capital Children's Choir and a music education professor. Though this was also her first time working with this particular group of singers, she felt the cooperative spirit. "We worked really hard to mesh all of these wonderful schools and teachers together, and I got 200 high-fives on the way in."

That energy was palpable throughout the program all the way to the last song, titled "We Are One." The sentiment of the piece was not lost on these young artists, especially Buck Lake fifth-grader Hailey Burke. Though she found it "kind of difficult to make your voice match other peoples' voices," the end result "sounded like one giant voice and that was what the song was about. It was really cool to hear it and to be thinking about the song at the same time, to be singing it with everyone else and having a great time with them."

Hailey's mom, Danielle Burke, has noticed a difference in Hailey's overall maturity this year and she feels it has a lot to do with her music training. "In music, you don't always get what you want, you might not get the solo or the



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Students sing "We Are One" during the Honor Chorus concert.

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song you want and you have to realize that you're part of a team. I've seen her grow and even though she might get a little frus-

trated, she's able to control it and say 'OK, it's somebody else's turn to have that part.' ”

Hailey's music teacher, Barbara Hartsfield, was thrilled to hear this because it's one of the many qualities she nurtures in her students. “When kids are into music, that discipline of practicing and

that discipline of teamwork and listening to one another, those are all great skills for life.”

Amanda Karioth Thompson is the education and exhibitions director for the Council on Culture & Arts. COCA is the capital area's umbrella agency for arts and culture (www.tallahasseearts.org).