

Making musical memories

By Stephen Snyder, Times Staff Writer Carroll County Times, Sunday, October 10, 2004

Shannon Kiser remembers what it was like as a boy singer growing up.

"It was frustrating at times," Kiser said at the Children's Chorus of Carroll County's annual Boys' Night event, held Sept. 28 at Westminster Church of the Brethren.

Now in its third year, the Boys' Night event encourages continued singing for young boys. According to Diane W. Jones, executive director of the children's chorus, girls far outnumber boys in most choirs, both youth and adult.

"It's a common problem for almost all choral music groups," she said.

The children's chorus only has about 20 boys in the entire choir, which includes more than 110 members, Jones said.

Besides giving boys an opportunity to sing together in a group, the Boys' Nights also bring in special guests to show them that singing is something they can enjoy throughout their lives. This year the special guest was the Old Line Statesmen Barbershop Chorus.

The reason fewer boys participate in singing groups than girls is twofold. First, many boys drop out of singing groups when their voices begin to change, usually toward the end of middle school.

"It is difficult," said Chad Kardell, who directs boys in Bel Canto, the middle school section of the children's chorus. "They can't sing high anymore. They squeak; they don't like it when they squeak."

The best thing teachers and choir directors can do in that situation is explain to boys that the way they sound is normal.

"It's obviously an awkward situation," Kiser said. "You have to help them realize it's supposed to sound that way."

Kiser recalled how hard it was when his voice changed. Some days he couldn't sing any notes; the next week he would only be able to sing five.

"It's constantly changing," he said.

But Kiser got through it with support.

"The adults in my life kept pushing me through it. I knew it was temporary," Kiser said.

None of the boys at the event had gone through their voice change yet. But Michael McGuire, 13, an eighth-grader at North Carroll Middle School who has already performed in some high school productions, said he knows what to expect when he does.

"I know that'll be something I can relate to," McGuire said.

The bigger problem, according to the children's chorus directors, is cultural. Growing up, children usually view singing as more of a girls' activity.

"The perception is singing is for females," Kardell said.

More boys tend to gravitate toward sports programs, Kiser said, whereas more girls take up singing. But the two don't have to be mutually exclusive. Barbara Kilduff's son Grant plays sports, but also sings in the children's chorus.

"When he was in preschool he just loved to sing," Kilduff said. "He likes to be on stage, likes to be in front of people."

Jones remembered a boy in the children's chorus who would show up to rehearsal with the black marks under his eyes from football practice.

Jones said the Boys' Night programs, which are open to all boys in the community, have been helpful in recruiting more boys to the children's chorus. The Bel Canto middle school group gained two new boys after last year's program.

Jones also hopes to set up a new program in the children's chorus for boys whose voices have changed. Currently boys can no longer participate in the chorus once their voices change.

"As soon as we have enough boys, we'll be off and running," Jones said.

Members of the Old Line Statesmen enjoyed performing for the boys. The group hopes that boys will be inspired to keep singing after they get out of school and perhaps one day join the barbershop chorus.

"We want to show them that literally singing is a lifelong thing," said Jeff Liebknecht, director of the Old Line Statesmen.

After the Old Line Statesmen finished performing some of their repertoire, the boys sang a song they all knew, the national anthem. Near the end of the song, their voices soared to hit the highest note.

"I really love getting kids singing," Kiser said, "no matter what age."

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How to join

The Children's Chorus of Carroll County holds auditions in May. For more information on joining visit the Web site at <http://c4notes.com>.