

A season of song Christmas has student choirs spreading comfort and joy

DIANE SMITH

Publication Date: **December 23, 2006** Page: **A1** Section: **News** Edition: **Tarrant**

FORT WORTH — A choir of teens stands in a circle in the rotunda at the Tarrant County Courthouse.

Their voices drift above a spiraling stairwell toward transfixed onlookers. Eyes start to glisten as the students sing:

"Peace on earth."

"Good will toward men."

"Jesus Christ is born."

Smiles flash as the song ends. The singers shout, "Merry Christmas, everyone! ¡Feliz Navidad! Happy Hanukkah!"

They are the Singing Chaparrals of O.D. Wyatt High School, who, along with other choirs in school districts like Arlington and Keller, are performing throughout the county this holiday season.

"They're awesome," someone whispered at the courthouse, where the Chaparrals have marked the holiday season for 15 years.

Under the leadership of longtime director Jewell Kelly, the high school has built a tradition as a choir powerhouse.

The holiday season is often a time when choir programs can put their talents on display. Choirs sing to crowds at government offices, hospitals, malls, airports, banks and schools.

"The beauty inside the singer is a magnet to the beauty inside another person," Kelly said.

Educators say singing in the choir helps students build self-confidence and develop a work ethic.

"There's a lot the kids learn that has nothing to do with music," said Bob King, director of choral and general music for the Fort Worth school district. "They learn teamwork. They learn to focus on skills because they are trying to make something perfect."

If onlookers listen closely during performances, they'll notice a diversity of singing styles and choir programs — from show tunes to gospel hymns, classical works to songs in Spanish.

"Choral music in Texas is considered a model throughout the country," said Leigh Ann McClure, head choir director at Central High School in the Keller school district.

While these young performers impress audiences, they also dream of their future.

Some are focused on college and want to be teachers or accountants. Others want music scholarships so they can build on talents some first discovered in church choirs when they were 9, 10 or 11.

"We believe we have a God-given talent that over the years is going to progress," said Lewis Keys, 17, a senior and vice president of the Chaparrals. "We want to be artists. We want to perform. The feeling of performing — there's nothing like it."

Finding their voices

Director Demetrius Ethley wants to build up his Eastern Hills High School choir program. He's been putting the word out among students that all styles are welcome. His varsity choir has performed at the school, Dallas/Fort Worth Airport and Jubilee Theater and is eager for more gigs.

Ethley, who sang for Wyatt's Chaparrals in the late 1980s, said the aim is to mesmerize and recruit.

His strategy works. A recent performance for Eastern Hills students was a selling point.

"You could hear other kids say, 'Shush, shush,'" he said.

When students give choir a chance, Ethley said, a new world opens and students are driven to excel.

"It gives them plenty of opportunities that are positive," Ethley said. "The majority of our discipline problems are because they are bored."

Over at Wyatt, Kelly has been running a tight ship for more than 40 years. She makes her singers tuck in their shirts and show up prepared.

Recently, she greeted students as they prepared to carol through the halls at Wyatt.

"Ho, ho, ho," she chirped. "When you pass by a room, please sing in tune!"

One student pushed through without a Santa cap, and Kelly got tough.

"Where's your hat?" she said. "No hat, you don't sing."

Kelly said students need someone who will steer them right. They also need to be exposed to art and music, she said.

Junior Dezhon Johnson, a bass in the Dunbar Wildcat Choir, was about 9 when he realized he could sing.

When you find your voice, you want to share it, he explained.

"A lot of the times, when we sing, people cry and get all emotional," Johnson said. "It's not just singing. You have to feel the song and music."

'Taking it to the top'

Princeton Lewis is wide-eyed as the Chaparrals pull him into a performance. The cafeteria of Morningside Elementary School has become a stage, and the 9-year-old is swaying alongside singer Brittany Stevenson, who's holding his hand.

The choir works like a team, with Kelly making hand signals to soloists. She doesn't have a playlist, instead relying on the choir's vibe.

Except for the bells 16-year-old Chad Spencer carries, there are no instruments. Soprano, alto, tenor and bass voices blend together.

The choir uses a comedic edge during Rudolph, The Red-Nosed Reindeer. Senior Chaddick Manning, 17, relies on dramatic talent to steer an imaginary sleigh, and in a deep voice sings: "Rudolph, with your nose so bright, won't you guide my sleigh tonight?"

Adults chuckle. Children giggle.

The singers move from Deck the Halls to Gospel Christmas hymns with ease. Teachers cry. Sometimes, they join in the singing.

Then the choir brings down the house. Kelly calls it "taking it to church." Her students describe this as "taking it to the top."

"The angels sang 'Hallelujah. Glory, hallelujah,'" the choir sings.

Kelly gives the signal for a solo, and Stevenson lifts her alto-soprano voice higher and higher.

"God let this child be born in a manger filled with haaaay," she belts out. "A bright and shining star show wise men where he laaaay!"

She wipes a little sweat from her brow. She just took it to the top.

When this happens, she has the power to make a crusty old guy smile, inspire a smart-alecky teen to sing and fill a little boy with awe.

"It was fantastic," Princeton said, taking a moment to think. "It was like God working."