

Annual showcase to spotlight Durham youth

Melanie Johnson
Durham VOICE

For one night only, nearly 600 Durham public school students will occupy the stage of the Durham Performing Arts Center.

At 7 p.m. on Feb. 21, elementary, middle and high school students from across the district will be featured in "An Evening of Entertainment," a fundraiser for the Durham Public Schools Scholarship Foundation. The event, which celebrates its 35th anniversary this year, will present auditioned choral students performing choreographed numbers to a live band of professional musicians.

Mary Casey, the event's producer and arts director for DPS, said the event is designed to showcase the talent in Durham schools and also to raise scholarship funds for graduating high school seniors. Casey said pulling the event together is a huge group effort that includes music teachers, local and guest choreographers, a vocal clinician, board members and community support.

To start, students learn the songs for the event from their school's respective chorus teachers and are then taught the choreography in large group rehearsals with participants from other district schools. They are divided into elementary, middle and high school groups for these rehearsals.

Willie Hinton, professional dancer, choreographer and artistic director for Arts in Action, a North Carolina associate of the National Dance Institute, designed the choreography for all 240 elementary school children. Hinton said he wasn't fazed by the prospect of teaching hundreds of children.

"I knew what I was getting myself into because it's not too far from what I do now," Hinton said. "I'm used to working with a mass amount of kids."

Unlike the elementary and middle school children, the high school students did not begin rehearsals until last Saturday. Mike Weaver, a freelance director and choreographer who directs show choirs across the country, drove from Virginia to direct the high school students. Weaver said that despite having limited rehearsal time, the students rose to the occasion and put on a great show.



Organizers of "An Evening of Entertainment," an event that showcases the artistic talents of Durham public school students, gather at the associate producer's house to plan show logistics. (Staff Photo by Melanie Johnson)

"It's the miracle of the performing arts," Weaver said. "Kids are apt to come up with what you expect of them. If you set the bar high, while making it achievable, they'll come up to it."

Weaver said returning to North Carolina for "An Evening of Entertainment" is an opportunity to work with many children who may not have access to the best or newest dance facilities, but have passion for the arts.

"Sometimes it's not really about talent or nice facilities," Weaver said. "It's about commitment and desire and passion. And there's a lot of that in the kids in Durham."

Dena Byers, Hillandale Elementary's music teacher who also functions as a liaison for all Durham elementary school music teachers, said the event is something the kids look forward to every year and continue to participate in throughout their student careers.

"It's nice to see that progression," Byers said. "To see the kids using that expression, enjoying the event and continuing on with it. It's nice to see the kids you had in elementary school carry on through middle school and then in high school. And you see them onstage and you think, 'I taught you, I

taught you and you."

Erin Dangler, director of Broadway Bound in Chapel Hill and choreographer, said that seeing the kids' joy and excitement in performing on the DPAC stage is what makes all the hard work worth it.

"It's very exciting to be there," Dangler said. "The kids' eyes light up just to be in such a professional space, where so many professional artist have performed. It puts in perspective the enormity of this project."

IF YOU GO

WHEN: Thursday,
February 21 at 7 p.m.

WHERE: Durham
Performing Arts Center,
123 Vivian St., Durham

TICKETS: \$10, \$15, \$25,
\$30, \$35 (available online
at www.DPACnc.com or by
phone 680-2787)

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