

Entertainment & Lifestyle

ETC features sounds of success for 30 years

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By Kathleen Folkert

WEST AKRON – For three decades, children from Akron and beyond have been singing and dancing their hearts out at ETC School of Musical Arts.

West Akron resident Bob Heid began the group and is still at the helm as executive director.

"I'm here every day," said Heid, who retired two years ago after 35 years as a teacher in Stow.

He is assisted by a crew of music and dance professionals, including Cheryl Boigegrain, the choir director and music teacher at Litchfield Middle School in West Akron, who has been part of ETC for 20 years as a musical director.



Bob Heid and Cheryl Boigegrain have helped lead the ETC School of Musical Arts show choirs to many successes.

Photo: Kathleen Folkert

In addition to their work as leaders for the group, the two have seen the experience from the other side: both have two grown children who participated in the ETC singing and dancing ensembles.

ETC was formed in 1977 to provide special performance opportunities for young people. Its specialty is show choirs, where performers combine music and choreography.

Today, the group can claim more than 500 alumni, Heid said.

"A couple have gone on to Broadway, but we downplay that," he said. "A lot of our alumni have gone into people careers, like management and public relations. We like to think they pick up a certain amount of ability here."

The organization is comprised of three performing groups: the All Americans (for youths in ninth through 12th grades) and the Main Street Singers (for youths in fifth through eighth grades), which are traditional show choirs, and the New Generation Chorus (for children in third through sixth grades), which focuses mostly on singing with some minor choreography.

Heid is an Akron native. While he doesn't have special training or a degree in musical performance, he enjoyed performing in shows and musicals at East High School and Kent State University, where he earned a degree in elementary education.

He took his love of performing into his classroom in Stow, where he and ETC co-founder Robert Carlyon often staged musicals with their elementary school students.

"But there wasn't much going on for students once they reached middle school and high school," Heid said. "We got the kids geared up and then they didn't have anywhere to go."

So Heid and Carlyon started ETC (which stands for energy, talent and commitment) by getting together with children on Saturday afternoons to put together shows for the community. At that point, children in grades five through 12 were involved in the one group.

"We did about 40 performances a year in church basements, for PTA groups, hospitals, nursing homes," Heid said.

When the group hit the decade mark, Heid decided it should be split in two.

"We found we were either overchallenging the elementary school children or underchallenging the high school kids," he said.

That's about the time Boigegrain came on board as musical director. The Akron native is a Central-Hoyer High School graduate who earned bachelor's and master's degrees in music education at The University of Akron.

"Music was my favorite thing in school," she said. "I loved theater in high school and college, and I remember my professor asking me what degree I wanted and I said I wanted to major in high school musicals."

She has worked at more than a dozen Akron Public Schools in her 32 years with the district. It was while she was a music teacher at Case Elementary School in West Akron that she got involved with ETC.

"I was teaching at Case and I brought along a group of kids to audition," she said. "I had a lot of talented kids, and anything I could see they could audition for, I took them."

About 15 years ago, after being based in Stow and Cuyahoga Falls, ETC moved into Canal Place in

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expansive warehouse space for its practice studio.

The building is full of trophies and awards the ETC groups have won over the years. Heid said the organization didn't compete at first but then started to get involved in it and found a lot of success.

"We try to downplay the competitions," he said. "But you get into it and then you can't get out of it."

He added the performers do enjoy that aspect of the group. To compete, ETC often must travel out of state. They currently compete about four or five times a year, Heid said.

The groups have traveled for more than competitions, he added. About every three years, Heid plans an overseas trip. ETC choirs have performed in Australia, New Zealand, Paris, London and Dublin.

Getting children and their parents to participate in the trips has become more difficult in recent years, he said, due to cost and security concerns.

Boigegrain's two children had the opportunity to travel all over when they participated in ETC.

"They got so used to doing it that they thought everyone traveled all over the place," she said.

When ETC moved to the Valley, Heid said it was decided that a third group for younger singers should be offered.

"The best way for kids to enter the organization is to come in young," Heid said. So ETC began the Cuyahoga Valley Youth Chorus, which was intended to serve as a nonshow choir group for younger children. Last season, ETC revamped the concept and started the New Generation Chorus, an entry-level show choir made up of children in third through sixth grades.

The group is a spring-season only offering that gives children (and their parents) a taste of what ETC has to offer.

"There is some choreography," Heid said. "It's more elementary looking, but it's more than you would see in a school show. It went very well last year, and we plan to keep doing it."

The chorus, which meets on Saturday afternoons and is open to any child with an interest, will begin assembling around the end of January, Heid said.




Students come from a five-county area to participate in ETC, Heid said. Interest in the organization fluctuates, sometimes according to what is current in pop culture. The popularity of "boy bands" a few years back helped bring in some young men, he said.

"It's a struggle to get boys interested," said Heid, who noted that the young men who do participate get a lot out of the experience. "At our spring show, the last thing we do is sing a song together. And there's always an 18-year-old man with tears streaming down his face. Here they are and they're sobbing because they realize how much they enjoy it."

Boigegrain said the popularity of Disney's "High School Musical" movies also has helped to bring in interested children.

"'High School Musical' is nothing but show choir put into a musical," she said. "It's what we do."

Participation in the All Americans and Main Street Singers is by audition, which takes place in the spring. ETC also is planning an alumni reunion to mark its 30th season at its spring show. For more information on ETC School of Musical Arts, call (330) 923-2000 or go to www.geocities.com/energytalentcommitment/index.html.

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