

Young voices express the spirit of holiday season

By Kathryn Reed

Holiday music spills into the hallway, beckoning visitors to find the classroom the sounds are emanating from.

Swiveling to the song, two rows of young women are lined up between the desks and chairs. Some know the words by heart, while others read them on the screen.

“Guys, it’s the twist. You really need to get into it,” Paul Kushner instructs them.

This is the weekly rehearsal of the Blue Ribbon Choir – an all girls choir open to high school-age students. They are gearing up for the 18th annual Holiday Extravaganza in December. These 18 are part of an ensemble of nearly 300 students who will share the stage at MontBleu casino in Stateline for this two-day event.

The range of voices makes one think this is a professional, and definitely older, group. In just two hours the improvement is noticeable. If they sound this good in mid-November, what will the harmony be like in another month?

Sitting in the front of the room the harmonies – some four-part – are distinctive, rich and captivating. And to think they only practice as a group for two hours a week shows the natural ability as well as the work being put in outside of the four walls of South Tahoe High School. Each singer has a CD of the music and binder with the lyrics.



Blue Ribbon Choir members practice Nov. 13 for the December Holiday Extravaganza. Photo/Kathryn Reed

When one of the singers wants to go over a part Kushner is able take out the accompaniment on the computer and just play their part. There is no money to pay someone to accompany them, so the music is all computerized.

It helps that Kushner has a master's degree in computer education. He has been teaching in Lake Tahoe Unified School District for decades and is the founder of the district's choral program.

"More T's and D's" is a common refrain from Kushner. It is all about annunciation. It is knowing how to breathe when singing the word "Christmas" – not holding the vowel sound.

The Blue Ribbon Choir is the elite group – the one younger kids aspire to be in. Many of the girls in the room remember when they were little and knowing that it was this choir that they are now part that would mean they had accomplished something special.

A teacher recommendation or having been in an advanced choir are the ways to gain entry into this choir.

During a break they explain the reason they like being part of the choir is that it is challenging, allows them to express themselves, they meet new people, learn new music, they become a family.

Four of them want to carry their interest in music beyond high school. Sara Ortega wants to compose music, while Kaylee Chandler wants to teach it as well as perform professionally.

Yari Torres isn't sure what she wants to do with music, but knows it is something she could fall back on. She has been singing since third-grade – the age where LTUSD starts its students in choir. (However, Zaira Monette started in second grade because no one knew how old she was so they didn't kick her out.)

Sammi Bender wants to go to a top music school and see where it leads her. In December she will sing the national anthem at a Kings basketball game. She sang the “Star Spangled Banner” all summer at the standup paddleboard races in South Tahoe.

Bender, who is home schooled, says she got her voice from her grandfather, not her parents. She likes being in the Stadium View Building – one of the new facilities at STHS in the last few years – because the acoustics are much better. She's taking acting classes at Lake Tahoe Community College and hopes to try out for the winter production. Not being a student at STHS prevents her from being in plays at that school.

The choir comes under the auspices of the South Lake Tahoe Children's Choral Society. All the adult leaders volunteer their time and expertise.

“Because it's not school affiliated, we can do some very sacred music,” Kushner explains. Christian and Jewish tunes are part of the repertoire, so is a rap song.

The Holiday Extravaganza includes all the choirs in the district, which started practicing their tunes a month ago. In all, 31 songs will be sung. And for the finale, everyone will participate.

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Notes:

- 18th annual Holiday Extravaganza
- Dec. 19 and Dec. 20, 7pm, MontBleu showroom in Stateline
- \$10 adults, \$5 students and seniors, younger than 5 free. Tickets available at the door.