



Singers place a finger in their ear to check that they are singing in tune with the other voices. AMANDA THOMPSON

Musical literacy

Woodville's Mustang Choir gains confidence with each performance

Amanda Karioth Thompson Council on Culture & Arts

Jennifer Thrasher drew five evenly spaced horizontal lines on the board for her newly formed middle school choir. "I asked them, 'what is this?'" On that first day, nobody could verbalize the name of it but you could tell there was some kind of recognition," she recalled.

Her students had been introduced to the music staff in elementary school but it was clear that Thrasher had work to do if she wanted Woodville School's Mustang Choir to succeed.

"The staff is the most foundational thing we use in music," explained Thrasher whose main goal is music literacy. School began in August and since then the choir has shown significant growth.

They've even completed a public performance tour for residents in the HarborChase, Miracle Hill, and Miracle Village care facilities. "It was the most amazing choral experience. The students nailed it, absolutely nailed it," beamed Thrasher.



David Ceballos works on a music exercise. AMANDA THOMPSON

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Seventh-grader Fantasia Pasley is proud of what the group accomplished on the choir tour. "We did very well and everybody was giving us compliments." When thinking back to the residents she met, Fantasia added "some people don't have the voice to do it and we're supporting them with our voice to make them feel better. It boosts my confidence up to sing in front of other people."

To build the choir's music library, Thrasher applied for and received an Arts Education Grant from the Council on Culture & Arts. Kia of Tallahassee provided the grant funds and the choir included the car dealership in their performance tour.

"I felt that bringing our kids out there so they could see the generosity was essential. They're people who value the arts and they know it's important. We had to thank them," said Thrasher.

Leon County School administrators also got a concert. "We pulled everyone out of the building, they loved it. Superintendent Hanna came out. He sang with us and it was nice to see everyone just enjoying the music. To take the students from 'anyone know what a music staff is' to that tour was awesome."

The tour's success was due to the persistence of Thrasher and her students. They have dedicated themselves to the artistic process, which is accompanied by critique. "They can expect truth from me. They might not always



Jennifer Thrasher provides accompaniment for a vocal warm-up at Woodville School. AMANDA THOMPSON

like it but it's going to be the truth," said Thrasher. "If you want to improve, you have to know where your weaknesses are and how to strengthen them. How to overcome them and know that you can."

Eighth-grader David Ceballos appreciates that philosophy. "I like getting other people's opinions about how I'm doing and what I'm doing. It makes me better, it makes us better and we're all reaching towards a certain goal."

David's classmate ReAnnah McDuffie agreed. "Mrs. Thrasher won't lie to us which helps us figure out what's wrong so we can fix it. I know I can trust her and the rest of the choir too because we're all in this together. It helps me

build a sense of trust and not just in here but outside of choir too."

Trust is based on respect, a priority for Thrasher. "We're going to be respectful above all. Hopefully, they know that this choir room is a safe space for them. They are putting themselves out there. It's a very vulnerable thing. Your voice is your most personal quality. That's who you are and if you're singing and somebody laughs at you or condescends, you're going to shut down."

In addition to finding a supportive

place for self-expression, seventh-grader Khani Moulton has learned that music provides solace when he needs it most. "I lost my grandmom last year and now I've been able to deal with it a little bit. She used to be in the church choir and when I'm in choir, I can remember her," he said.

Love and loss are common themes in music and the choir is currently working on "Pie Jesu" by Mary Lynn Lightfoot. The piece was written in tribute to the children who died in the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing and it will be sung by the Mustang Choir for this year's Music Performance Assessment. Thrasher said she chose this song because "everyone has had some kind of loss and we can all understand."

These choir students weren't alive at the time of that tragedy, yet through the music, they're connected to it and to anyone affected by violence.

"Our kids, not just at Woodville but across our world, are dealing with so much, Thrasher said. "Things that no adult should have to. Music can offer a way to cope and move forward. It inspires us to rise above. It allows us to say things and have them heard in a way that just scripting them couldn't. We've got a message that we want to be able to share and sing."

Amanda Karioth Thompson is the Assistant Director for the Council on Culture & Arts. COCA is the capital area's umbrella agency for arts and culture (www.tallahasseearts.org).