

A capella Festival Hosted by UNH Manchester Hit a Winning Note

Thursday, October 4, 2012

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Manchester West High School a cappella group.

Back in 2009, Susan Wilkes's kids needed a win. Manchester West High School, where they were all students, had just lost Bedford students to a new high school. The kids

had lived through that transition; losing friends and watching the population of their school go down.

"The kids really needed a boost," says Wilkes, the chorus director for West High School in Manchester. "Things were not so great at school. ...We thought, what will get these kids excited about school and what will help keep the standards high?"

Wilkes entered her students into the very first Voices of the (603) festival created and led by UNH Manchester's Milling Around a cappella student group.

"They won," Wilkes says. "Because our (student) population was reduced, there was a worry that standards would be reduced also. West continues to go through transformation. Our students are talented and successful and we strive to help them believe that. Numbers don't tell the whole story." Wilkes's students have not only competed every year since, they are still the reigning state champs.

Voices of the (603) was the only a cappella competition for middle and high schools in the state then and still is.

Jamie Saucier, student activities coordinator at UNH Manchester and the lead organizer for the event, says "the competitions show students that music is lifelong learning and that one doesn't have to be a professional to perform."

Plus, the competitions have helped choir directors around the state recruit students into their music ensembles, he says. At the competition this year, which will be held Friday, October 12, 2012, teams of middle and high school students from around the state will begin the day with clinics at UNH Manchester. Here they will have a chance to learn new skills such as Beatboxing 101, pick up rehearsal techniques, learn how to quell audition anxiety and network with other students around the state. But the clinics aren't just for students, Saucier says. Many of them are geared toward teachers to help them pick up some new tricks to take back to the classroom.

After a mid-day rehearsal, the teams make their way to the lodge at Manchester's McIntyre Ski Area to perform in a public concert --where a 2012 N.H. schools a cappella champion will be recognized and celebrated.

The competition has even inspired a curriculum change in the chorus program at West. Last year for the final exam, students were challenged with putting together an a cappella arrangement of a song, one of which the group would use at this year's competition.

The event is hosted by Milling Around, the UNH Manchester a cappella group. Funding is provided by UNH Manchester, the Frederick Smyth Trust, and Campus Compact of New Hampshire. Not only is the group the only a collegiate a cappella group in Manchester, it's the only one on a commuter campus in the entire country. Since 2009 the group has raised over \$5,000 for charities across New Hampshire and in spring 2012, Milling Around recorded a CD to help fund the Voices of the (603) festival.

To add to the excitement, this year, New Hampshire Public Television will be recording the entire festival --including the clinics and concert-- for broadcast.

For more information or to keep up with festival updates visit [Milling Around's site](#). Tickets for the benefit concert are \$10 each and are available to purchase online. All funds will be going to New Hampshire Citizens for the Arts.

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