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Preview: Teen moms find a voice singing with Edmonton's Belle Canto choir (with video)

Belle Canto choir member Cheryl Bosgood rehearses with students Kiaira Paradis, left, and Sharla Earl during a choir practice at Braemar School.



BY JODIE SINNEMA, EDMONTON JOURNAL MARCH 16, 2014

PREVIEW

What: Laughter and Lullabies concert, featuring the Braemar Girls' Choir and Belle Canto choir

Where: Robertson Wesley United Church, 10209 123rd St.

When: Sunday, March 23, 2:30 p.m.

Admission: by donation. All proceeds go to the Terra Centre at Braemar School

EDMONTON - Being a mom in high school isn't easy. There are the 2 a.m. feedings, the blurry-eyed mornings, and getting the babies into

their strollers and onto the bus, where the young women face disapproving looks, nasty comments about “babies taking care of babies” and parenting advice from strangers.

So when Reyane McDermott heads into a spare classroom in Braemar School one hour each week to join a women’s choir, it’s her time to sing it all out.

“It’s kind of like stress relief,” says 19-year-old McDermott, currently finishing her Grade 12 courses while her one-year-old son Teagan goes to daycare on-site. “It’s like therapy to us.”

McDermott’s face turns up into a smile and her shoulders move to the beat while she sings the Cups song from the movie Pitch Perfect. She sits around a table with other high school students and women from the community, mostly mothers, who belong to the [Belle Canto choir](#). McDermott can’t tap out the prescribed rhythm that goes with the song, using her hands and a cup, while singing at the same time, but she watches as the five members of Belle Canto master the rhythm and the melody.

Each week, five of 28 members of the female-only choir head to Braemar School to give young mothers the chance to sing. The school doesn’t offer music classes and doesn’t own any instruments, focusing its resources instead on English, chemistry and other core classes so the students can graduate with a high school diploma. About 150 pregnant teenagers and young moms attend Braemar, trying to balance studies with motherhood.

Getting to choir rehearsals can be difficult, what with exams or sick babies. Some weeks, none of the six or so student members show up, says Elaine Myhre, assistant conductor of Belle Canto.

That doesn’t concern Myhre, due with her first baby July 10.

“We have all really benefited from being part of a women’s choir, a support system that was only women supporting women,” Myhre said. “There are things that women talk about and things that women will say when they’re just around women that they won’t say when they’re with men in a choir.”

Think struggles with raising a child, or relationship problems with partners.

"We thought these girls could benefit from a similar experience," Myhre says.

She and Heather Johnson, who founded the all-women's choir in 1991 and is now the artistic director of the umbrella group Cantilon Choirs, applied for and received a \$5,000 Canada Council for the Arts grant to bring music into the school at 9359 67A St. starting October 2013. Johnson said that money, yet unspent since all the choir members come voluntarily on their own time and dime, will hopefully buy a keyboard and sheet music for the school in the hope the choir becomes more permanent.

"It's like singing with a group of sisters," Myhre says of her three years with a women-only choir. "The rehearsals are really open and honest and we are a support system for each other. If there is someone's wedding, we all sing. If there's a funeral, we all sing. We're a family and we've found this family through our mutual love of excellent choral music."

Singing with high school amateurs makes no difference, Myhre says.

"Whether it's a teen mom or a planned pregnancy, there are a lot of unknowns as far as being a mom is concerned, and (we're) just supporting each other in this very new exciting adventure," Myhre, 28, says.

Music and the creative arts also give the teenagers a new, positive way to express themselves, said Karen Mottershead, executive director for the Terra Centre, which provides the support services, such as daycare, to Braemar students.

"A lot of them come from very deep and challenging places and because of that, have a lot of deep emotion," Mottershead said. "A lot of them have not had successful relationships, whether it's teachers and parents and friends.

"This (choir) is important because this is a group of women with whom they share that spirit of motherhood. And (Belle Canto members) are here just as open and accepting community people, which is something (the

female students) don't experience often."

The choir also adds stability.

"The great thing about this choir is that it's consistent, it's here, whether (the young moms are) here or not, whether none of them show up," Mottershead says. "Something stable has happened here for them."

Johnson said she has worked with teenage girls for years and loves the power that music has in their lives. A mother of two herself, Johnson also wants to share the art of lullabies, since singing the soothing songs calms both babies and moms. The girls' choir, together with Belle Canto, will sing a March 23 concert called Laughter and Lullabies, with all money going to support the Terra Centre.

"Hushabye, don't you cry, go to sleep-a little baby," sing Kerry-Ann Crossman, 18, and Teesha Taylor, 20.

"We sound good," Crossman says with a smile. She and her boyfriend are raising one-year-old Brooklyn. "I think it's just really great the ladies donate their time for us."

"I want to say, it's empowering in a way because you have your voice," says Taylor, whose baby Kaedan turns one March 28. "You have your voice and everybody has their voices too, but you know you're part of that instead of chasing a little kid around and yelling at them."

Cheryl Bosgoed, who has sung with Belle Canto for seven years, says the time at Braemar is her favourite hour of the week. Bosgoed had her first child at age 19 and knows the struggles of raising a baby in poverty. Her children are now 36, 19 and 16.

"Music is fun," said Bosgoed, adding that studies have shown hormones and endorphins are released when people sing in choirs. "It doesn't happen when you sing by yourself. ... They just come and have their lunch and sing."

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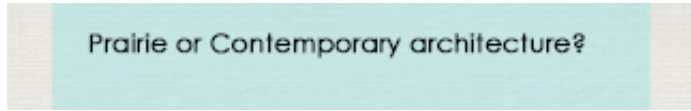
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