

Music that makes a difference

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Halifax choir performs benefit concert for at-risk youth



Vanessa Lindsay-Botten conducts the You Gotta Sing! choir with enthusiasm. (Connor Dalton)

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The You Gotta Sing! choir has a simple audition process — everyone gets in.

The choir had its final performance of its fall session on Friday, Jan. 27. The concert was a fundraiser for Phoenix, a Halifax non-profit organization that helps homeless and at-risk youth.

The 40-member choir sang for two hours at the Cathedral Church of All Saints on Martello Street, watched by an energetic audience of 60 people.

Phoenix staff set up an information booth at the church entrance and the suggested donation was between \$15 and \$20. The concert raised \$800, which went directly to Phoenix.

The founder and director of the choir, Vanessa Lindsay-Botten, bounced around facing the choir, leading the songs and occasionally playing the piano. Her arms rising and falling, she invited the audience to sing along for the first two songs.

After the concert, Lindsay-Botten said, “I’m tired but it’s a really good tired.”

The mother of two directs the choir along with husband John Lindsay-Botten. The choir is structured into 18-week sessions with weekly rehearsals. This session started on Sept. 14. Every rehearsal is repeated in three different locations across HRM to fit everyone's schedule.

Anyone can join—regardless of singing ability, age or gender. Being a member costs \$175 for the whole session. A bursary exists for anyone wants to join but can't afford it.

Vanessa Lindsay-Botten, a professional music educator, went to Victoria, B.C. in September 2010 to study community choir leadership, an intensive two-week course where students learn how to start community choirs.

Students from the program created the Ubuntu Choirs Network, a group of inclusive community choirs across Canada and the United States.

She learned of Phoenix in the spring of 2010 through her nine-year-old daughter, who was in Sunday school at the Cathedral Church of All Saints. A Phoenix youth who had been through their programs came to share with the class.

“Whatever they shared, in a kid-friendly way, about their life story and what Phoenix did for them, moved her and really got her thinking,” said Lindsay-Botten.

She met with Phoenix staff in November to discuss a benefit concert.

Phoenix was created in 1987. Last year, it helped more than 1,000 homeless and crisis youth, aged 12-24. The walk-in Phoenix Centre for Youth on Coburg Road helps an average of 40 youth a day through free meals, showers and counselling.

They also run three houses of supervised apartments for youth working towards independence. Their goal for cash donations this year is \$720,000.

The head of fundraising at Phoenix, Crystal Cowie, had a good first impression of Lindsay- Botten.

“She was very genuine, she cared—you could tell,” says Cowie. “When people want to take that on, we are very encouraging.”

Phoenix has its own choir that's becoming a big part of its work. The Phoenix Community Choir was created in September, and 20 youth from its programs joined.

In November, in Lennoxville, Que. the choir joined forces with Bishop's University Singers. The following weekend, both choirs travelled back to Halifax for performances at Citadel High School. They sang songs by James Taylor, Bob Dylan and Aretha Franklin.

The Phoenix Community Choir had 40 singers; half were youth and the other half were Phoenix staff and volunteers. Cowie, whose full-time job is at Phoenix, sang in the choir and remembers the performances well.

“I would watch different people in the choir and as they sang they were completely lost in what they were doing, they were shining,” said Cowie.

A documentary on the Phoenix choir aired Dec. 21 on CBC Radio and CBC TV's The National. It starts with their rehearsals at St. Andrew's United Church on Coburg Road. They focus on the stories of Phoenix singers, including Flower West. She had a solo in the concert singing Rise Again, a song made famous by the Rankins.

The documentary ends on the thunderous applause and standing ovation after the Halifax concert.

Simon Abbott is preparing the Phoenix choir for an April concert, their first time performing alone. The 25-year-old professional organist was one of two assistant directors of the fall concerts. The concert will be all pop songs, as requested by youth from the choir.

He spoke about his experience at the intermission of the Jan. 27 fundraiser.

“There’s something about music, eh?”, Abbott told the crowd. “Nothing holds a candle to singing in a choir for changing someone’s life.”

He hopes the Phoenix choir will continue beyond April and become a permanent part of Phoenix’s programs.

Vanessa Lindsay-Botten, the community choir director, is amazed by what the Phoenix choir has done. She plans to make her choir’s January concert an annual fundraiser for Phoenix.