Wisconsin Singer Brings Big Time Show Home

For the last four years, Denmark has welcomed the Wisconsin Singers group from the University of Wisconsin-Madison to work with its music students before one of their nearly 40 yearly spring performances.

The group is returning to Denmark on April 12, providing UW senior and Denmark alumnus Aaron Mleziva at least one opportunity to perform in the school’s new Performing Arts Center. Mleziva, well-known here for his musical talents, said when he came home to take in performances of Beauty and the Beast last fall, he was continuously asked the same cheeky question: Aren’t you jealous of the students who get to use the new space?

The Singers two-hour performance, coming to Denmark on April 12, features professional-grade singing, dancing, and band instrumentation. The group also works with middle school and high school students in clinics before sharing a meal with them before the show.

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“Absolutely not. I got to be a part of a time when there was such growth,” Mleziva said, “There were four guys in the choir my senior year and now there’s gobs of them—more than four—I feel so proud even just in that I got to be a part of the greater appreciation toward music and the need for the space.”

Mleziva’s high school choir career was partly defined by pre-concert rehearsals during lunchtime in the old cafeteria, at times having to rehearse behind closed curtains so as not to disturb or distract the diners. This type of relationship made it more difficult than usual to shed some of the social stigmas attached to music programs, especially those in smaller towns, Mleziva said.

That barrier, however, is one that Mleziva helped erode away, highlighted by the reason for the opening performance of Aladdin in 2014 being postponed.

“I was in football, and our Jafar was a football player, and there were at least five other guys that were a part of the show that were also on varsity football,” Mleziva said. The football team made the players mark to someplace as big as Madison.

Both points were not without merit, but a discovery on campus solved the issue.

A member of Denmark High School Class of 2015, Aaron Mleziva found a close-knit community with the Wisconsin Singers on the large Madison campus. He’s not pursuing music professionally, but the group has given him a way to stay in touch with the passion that propelled him through his years at Denmark.

For them, the Singers are an outlet for their creative tendencies and a way to stay connected with their passion even though it may not become their profession.

While all in Singers clearly enjoy performing musically, if not adding ridiculous amounts of time commitment to already clustered college schedules, Mleziva’s favorite aspect of the group is not necessarily putting on the shows; rather, he values being able to inspire and influence the upcoming generation of musicians.

At each hosting site, many in small towns like Denmark, the group administers learning clinics to the middle school and high school students before breaking bread ahead of the show. Fostering small personal relationships and showing the human behind the performer can have powerful impacts.

“We were in Tomah a couple of weeks ago and they actually shipped to our Singers office this giant banner they had made with little messages and signed their names on them,” Mleziva said, “That was really cool, getting to read them. Some of the kids put little callouts to the people that they sat with at dinner.”
offs and won its first-round match-up against Roncalli. Due to the large amount of players in the cast, "we had to actually cancel our opening night show."

The group—this year, about 28 students—consists of instrumental musicians and singer/dancers. Each year is a new show, beginning with a meeting in summer in which the music is handed out. Members are expected to have their music memorized by the time they reconvene roughly a month later in mid-August.

"A lot of it is very much collegiate—you're taking accountability for what you need to do, like memorize your music," Mleziva said, "then we have a three-week group camp where we learn all the choreography and dances," where the band receives their music and rehearsals take place up until the start of classes in early September.

Once school starts, the group dedicates eight hours of every Sunday—from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m.—to intensive rehearsals, usually ending with a full run of the two-hour performance. Shortly—except the band has their music under muscle memory and the Singers are ready to put on a professional-grade show.

Yet, like Mleziva, most of the members are not majoring in anything to do with music. "It's kind of cool that... before they even see the show and can possibly be intimidated by you performance-wise, they get to know you at a really human, personal level. It's very neat to see how they respond to that, because we are just normal people but we get up on the stage and can be pretty phenomenal," he continued with all respective modesty.

This year Mleziva has taken on additional work as the group's Company Manager, acting as a liaison between the students and the administration of the non-profit organization which funds the group. He's the lone student in attendance at board meetings, sends out weekly updates and communications to the performers, sets up the group's transportation from location to location, coordinates the set-up of clinics with each school's director, and helps make sure the meals go off without a hitch.

To the Denmark product, though, managing responsibility is all a matter of looking at it.

"We always say that everybody has the same amount of time in the day, it's all about what you choose to do with it. That's one of the great things about Singers... it forces you to have to grow from mistakes. You can't make a mistake and then keep making that same mistake—the consequences will be bad if you let things get bad," Mleziva said.

That includes time management as well as tightening up aspects of the performance—part of the communications he sends out include notes from previous rehearsals. Hopefully, he says half-laughing everyone shores up those areas so, "we don't keep getting the same notes over and over again."

Upon his return to the Denmark music rooms next month, he will likely hear the same question about possible jealousy toward the revamped space again and again. Being able to work directly with students taking part in a program he helped rejuvenate will mean more.

"I feel more proud of getting to watch the kids now enjoy that space than I do any sort of jealousy," Mleziva said.

In more ways than one, the Wisconsin Singers group has bolstered Mleziva's view of music. Ending his college career on the new stage with a strong musical program coming behind him will be a special moment, if just for the veteran performer.

"Singers every year has just promoted that message that there isn't a stigma to being involved in music at all. I'm really excited for our closer in the show this year; it just has a phenomenal message to it and I'm just so excited to sing that song in Denmark... basically the same message I've been trying to put out since I was in 7th grade trying to get people to do music because it's fun," he said, not giving away any specifics of the performance.

Mleziva did offer one teaser for the April 12 show.

"I'm not an emotional guy, but I might get emotional—that's all I'll say."