

Miami Children's Chorus hits the right note on music education

By Miraisy Rodriguez
U/Miami News Service

For the last six weeks, about 30 children at an after-school care program in Florida City set up chairs in a semi-circle precisely at 4:30 p.m. and anxiously ask, "Where's Miss Annie?"

Analy Mendez — Miss Annie to the kids — is the artistic administrator for the Miami Children's Chorus. Twice a week, she and a group of chorus volunteers drive down from the Coral Gables headquarters to teach the children about music.

"It's important for kids to connect with individuals who have had other experiences and are from another part of the [Miami-Dade] community," said Mendez, who was educated at the Boston Conservatory. "It's about the human connection."

The chorus, established in 1965, has been promoting singing in underserved Miami-Dade communities for more than 10 years through an outreach program called "All Together Now." The program, which also seeks to preserve songs that reflect the county's multicultural heritage, is part of the chorus' vision of "a community where every child can experience the joy of singing."

Mendez's team spends a couple hours each time exposing the children to music — how to warm up their voices, read sheet music and play some instruments. They are preparing the kids for their grand performance on Saturday at the Homestead Community Center.

"Will someone be throwing out flowers to us?" one of the boys asked Mendez during rehearsal on Oct. 13. "Maybe I will," she replied with a smile.

This is the first time MCC has partnered with nonprofit organizations around the county, including Sweet Vine Inc., which receives funding from The Children's Trust to serve Florida City children.

"When Lucrecia [Loumiet] called me, I cried," said Tonnette Collier of Sweet Vine, referring to the MCC community outreach coordinator.

"For years the MCC has been offering my kids scholarships [to the chorus]," said Collier, the center's founder and executive director. "But parents can't be counted on to get the children to rehearsals — many are unemployed or under-employed."

Collier has been taking children from her program to MCC events for the past six years as part of her passion for exposing children from lower-income families to the everyday experiences of kids with more means.

“Ms. Collier is very committed to opening the children’s eyes to new things,” said Loumiet. “She runs a tight ship with a lot of love.”

Mendez does the same. After several interruptions at last week’s rehearsal, she told the children that her boss would attend their performance and that her future was in their hands. The other volunteers looked at each other and smiled, but the children took Mendez seriously. Their next song was flawless.

“I have to find ways to motivate them,” Mendez explained. “Whatever it takes for them to get quality experience.”

Collier feels MCC’s visits have been teaching kids a lot more than music. They’re also developing social skills and discipline, she said.

Collier is looking for additional funding to pay for MCC staffers to continue teaching her children after this weekend’s final performance.

That would delight Sweet Vine youngsters like 7-year-old Danielle Evans-Williams.

“I like singing,” she exclaimed. “It’s fun!”