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Reunion Hootenanny Celebrates Stanley Choral Director Brian McKibben

Former Stanley Middle School students gather for '70s sing-a-long

By Jennifer Wake



1973 Stanley Yearbook Photo provided

Heidi Rahlmann Plumb coordinated the event with Adele Gronner-Connor, both former chorus members, and current mothers of Stanley Middle School students. Lyrics were projected on the wall as approximately 30 former chorus students - accompanied by fellow alums on tambourines, a keyboard, acoustic guitars, and McKibben himself on his own guitar - sang tunes from the past: "Hotel California" (Eagles), "Country Comfort" (Elton John), and many more.

"Teachers don't often get to know the impacts they have made, especially 30-plus years after the fact," said Rahlmann Plumb. "To be able to thank Brian and share with him how meaningful an experience it was to be in his class was really a gift."

The former chorus students came from as far as the Pacific Northwest to join in the sing-along and reminisce with their choral director.

Anita Orne, who now teaches music in Washington, and also plays in a trio said, "While Brian taught chorus, which implies singing, he scooped me up - a fledgling guitarist with not much of a voice, and showed me the path to non-classical music (not a path too many schools offer), and the glories of playing back-up, which I still follow and teach today."

Others also went on to pursue musical careers: David Sasse was cast in the recent Lamplighter's Musical Theater production of "Princess Ida," and Paul Rustigan has a Bay Area band called Swoop Unit.

Plans for the event started last November, and were coordinated on Facebook where a group of more than 70 members followed the preparations and rekindled friendships. Posts following the event underscored the respect, love and admiration students had, and continue to have, for McKibben and how his class changed who they were.

"Brian introduced me to the music of the time," said Martha De Carbonel Patterson. "Before Little Chorus, I didn't have a lot of confidence in myself, or felt I had much to offer. Like others have said, he made everyone feel unique and valued."

Lynn Barakos explained how rare and wonderful the sing-along experience is: "Most of us in western 'civilized' society rarely get the chance to sit together with a group of friends making music, being silly, singing our guts out... Brian basically started my addiction to this kind of communal expression of musical joy!"

"If there's anything I want from this life, it's to have a chance to use music to bring people together in the cause of peace," McKibben said. "I've been more than extremely fortunate to have had that chance, over and over. I'm not done yet."

Plans for another Hootenanny are already being discussed.

In 1974, while some choral groups were singing pieces from "Oliver," and folk songs like "How Sad Flow the Streams" at the First Annual Intermediate Choral Festival, the Stanley Middle School Chorus directed by Brian McKibben was belting out the Everly Brothers song, "All I Have to Do Is Dream," and "We Can Work it Out" by John Lennon and Paul McCartney.

At a Lafayette home Jan. 12, the walls reverberated with these songs and more as former Stanley students gathered to honor McKibben at what was dubbed the "Brian McKibben Stanley Chorus Reunion Hootenanny." The beloved McKibben taught at Stanley from 1969 to the mid-1980s.

"Brian was the most kind-hearted, influential, special, cool teacher I've ever had!" said former student Jayne Schonach.

"He made Chorus unique by the songs we sang. They were the songs of our time," added former student Carol Duncan. "I never had another teacher throughout the rest of my formal education that ever made an impact on me like Brian did."

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