

Kesling program at Boys and Girls Clubs of Bloomington exposing kids to performing arts

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The Lindsey O'Brien Kesling Performing Arts Program offered by the Boys and Girls Clubs of Bloomington will receive a \$2,000 cash gift plus a plaque for winning the 2013 "Merit Award for Program Excellence in the Arts" from the Boys and Girls Clubs of America.

But while the local clubs' program director, Matthew Searle, is excited about the national recognition the innovative program has garnered, he's more excited about the impact the program is having on area young people.

"Our program offers unique opportunities for kids by bringing to the club Indiana University's talented music and performing arts programs and Bloomington's rich arts community," Searle said. "I feel there are many important lessons about life that are tied to the performing arts. The program provides kids with opportunities to have leadership roles and focuses on the importance of academic success, good character, and how healthy life choices allow us them find success and happiness."

The performing arts program was founded in the fall of 2011 in memory of Lindsey O'Brien Kesling, a former Indiana University student and Big Sister to one of the Boys and Girls Clubs' members.

The program has three components — monthly live performances, classes and workshops, and scholarships. The monthly performances are by professional and student performing artists — ranging from modern chorus singing and African dance to improv comedy and marionette plays. Recent performances have included Bernard Woma, master of the Ghanaian xylophone, with his Saakumu Dance Troupe and the Singing Hoosiers from the Indiana University Jacobs School of Music.

"The performances take place at the Lincoln Street Club, but members from the other two clubs can attend, so there might be 100 to 120 kids at any given performance," Searle said. "It serves as a way to unite the three clubs, and allows members and their families to participate in a communal experience."

Each performance is followed by an educational career exploration workshop for members of the clubs' tutoring program and performing arts classes. The program also offers children classes in the performing arts and workshops in choir, violin, drama, improv comedy and dance.

"The classes aim to inspire confidence, get members active and learning in new ways, and spark a lifelong

interest in the performing arts,” Searle said. “Each semester, the classes culminate in a performing arts showcase that’s presented at a public venue and features club members who’ve participated in the classes.”

The program uses partnerships with local performing artists and groups to give participants further experiences. For example, Ly Wilder, an IU adjunct lecturer in jazz, co-directs the club’s “Rockin’ Ninja All-Star Choir,” which in the fall of 2012 performed before nearly 300 people at the Boys and Girls Clubs of America Midwest Leadership Conference at the Hyatt Hotel in Indianapolis.

The third component of the program is the awarding of annual scholarships — \$500 each to one boy and one girl — to fund their participation in advanced performing arts camps and classes in the region, allowing them to expand on the interests they’ve developed through the program.

Peace Jobito, a fourth-grader at University Elementary School, used her scholarship to get involved in an advanced show choir called Syncopation, an opportunity that provided her with song and dance training from local professionals.

“I liked it a lot,” Peace said. “It was really, really hard, but it was also fun and helped me a lot.”

Wilder, who co-directs Syncopation, said, “Peace is a fantastic performer with a sweet spirit and strong work ethic. It’s unusual for a child of her age to remember complex choreography and coordinate her body so well, but she can do both.”

Peace was featured in a production performed by Syncopation in front of 3,000 people as part of the Chimes of Christmas Show with the Singing Hoosiers.

“It was biggest crowd I’d ever seen,” she said. “But once I got on stage, I thought, ‘I can do this.’”

Peace hopes her involvement in the performing arts program is only the beginning.

“I love dancing, because it lets you express what you feel inside,” she said. “I would love to sing and dance professionally some day, and maybe even be a superstar on TV.”

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