

Kilmer Center Students Stretch Creative Muscles for Concert

by BRIAN TROMPETER, Staff Writer | Posted: Friday, November 29, 2013 7:21 am

Children love to sing, doubly so when the lyrics and melody are of their own creation.

Students at Kilmer Center in Vienna, aided by their peers at adjacent Kilmer Middle School, on Nov. 26 got to perform “Happy Crazy Wow,” an alma mater song for the school that they helped pen.

Stacy Kafka, an expressive-arts teacher at the center who was the driving force behind the concert, marshaled the proceedings enthusiastically.

The event’s main performers were singer Heather Mae and Paul Reisler, founder and artistic director of Kid Pan Alley, a national non-profit song-writing workshop for children.

Besides “Happy Crazy Wow,” the pair sang an ode to companionship, “Best Friends,” as well as other songs in their repertoire. Reisler also demonstrated his skill on guitar while Mae took a break and soothed her vocal cords with bottled water.

Some Kilmer Center students sang with the middle-school pupils in the gym’s center, while others sat in folding chairs or watched the concert from their wheelchairs.

Kafka got the idea for the concert in April after a teacher informed her about Kid Pan Alley.

Reisler’s organization was having a concert at Forestdale Elementary School in Springfield and that school’s principal invited students from the Key Center, which has programs similar to those at the Kilmer Center.

Kafka watched those students write songs for the program and decided the Kilmer Center could benefit from a similar effort.

“I thought, ‘There’s got to be a way to make it more authentic for the special-needs kids,’” she said. “Paul and I provided several ways to get legitimate ideas and themes from our students and incorporate them into the lyrics of our song. We decided to write an alma mater song for our school, and it’s awesome.”

Reisler sent Kafka 10 song-writing questions aimed at jogging students’ brains and producing potential themes for the song. School officials obtained input from every student at Kilmer Center, found words that rhymed with their suggestions and had Kilmer Middle School students help write the lyrics and melody.

The middle-school students also served as “performance shadows” during the concert, assisting the center’s pupils and singing songs with them.

Kafka, who last year received an award from the Optimist Club of Greater Vienna, said the club helped underwrite the majority of the concert's expenses.

The Kilmer Center is a Fairfax County public school that serves people from age 5 to 22 who have physical or mental disabilities.

Michael Romanelli, who has served as the center's principal for three years, said the concert allowed students to engage their minds creatively and interact with students their own age.

The center holds monthly assemblies featuring everything from puppeteers and Chinese acrobats to women's organizations and musical groups.

"The benefit is that [the students] are able to be exposed to experiences that other children are exposed to," he said.

The center's students, many of whom do not speak, used technology to communicate and create the school's alma mater song for the concert. Pupils in different classes contributed elements for the tune, Romanelli said.

"No one class did the entire song," he said. "When you go together to put it all in one song, it makes it very fulfilling."