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Duo's music brings contagious cheer

Kathy Coffey | Sep. 9, 2010

Justin Lansing, left, and Joe Mailander (Alex Johnson)

For an hour the clients of Empowerment in Denver didn?t have to think about their parole officers, unpaid bills, drug tests, applications for housing, or GED studies. As long as they were singing with the Okee Dokee Brothers, they were free, happy, smiling. People who?d made poor choices or been scorned by polite society, they simply clapped and sang, unworried about past mistakes. While the music played, they could believe in the promise of ?I?ll Fly Away?: ?a land where joy shall never end.?

Who brought about this merciful reprieve -- and why? Meet Joe Mailander and Justin Lansing. Childhood friends in Denver, they attended Most Precious Blood Parish School and Regis Jesuit High School together. Then Lansing went to Lake Forest College in Illinois and Mailander to St. John?s University in New York. During college, they founded a nonprofit, the Medicinal Strings, a name that underscores their belief in the healing power of music.

In a bluegrass-folk band with four other performers, their mission is sharing, promoting and inspiring the arts for those who need them most. That translates to over 120 free concerts since Medicinal Strings received nonprofit status in52005. These songfests entertain the underserved populations of homeless shelters, hospitals, retirement centers, child-care facilities, and soup kitchens.

Mailander and Lansing double as the Okee Dokee Brothers, a for-profit duo begun after college and based in Minneapolis, with a mission to call forth in children and adults ?the intrinsic ability to discover, imagine, and create through music.? Their original songs ?remind audiences of their own make-believes and treehouse pretendings.? The pair performs their own compositions at libraries, schools, bluegrass festivals, and state fairs throughout the Midwest. Their newest CD helps English speakers learn Spanish through song.

Mission statements can be dry, but that?s the last word to describe this dynamic pair, nicknamed ?the kids with beards.? Young, funny and unpretentious, they have a knack for inviting the participation of even unlikely musicians. Mailander said, ?To be in a church basement with 300 homeless guys all clapping and stomping -- you see how music transforms!?

Sites where both bands have performed applaud their contagious cheer. Tom Burnham of Peter & Paul Community Services in St. Louis described the relentlessness of homelessness: ?This population seldom

experiences live entertainment of any kind. They?re homeless every hour of every day of every week. I?ve been here more than 20 years, and that absolute expression of joy I saw today at the concert -- it?s rare.?

Justine Zollo of the Gathering Place, a shelter for battered women in Denver, said: ?We give people services all the time. But one of the greatest is to remind them of their humanity in a really positive, beautiful way. That?s what I saw in the audience today as the band performed.?

A review from CoolMomPicks.com focuses on the concerts for children: ?This two-member band from Minneapolis makes twangy, toe-tapping folk music with smart, funny lyrics that are equal parts hillbilly, 7-year-old boy and your favorite teacher.?

How did it begin? Mailander and Lansing remember distinctly their ?call.? Chuck Morris, who books all the top shows in Denver, liked their music and wanted to audition them. This was big time for college students, and they eagerly agreed to perform the next night. Mailander got home and announced the good news, and his mother, Rita, director of faith formation at Most Precious Blood Parish, shared the thrill. Then she reminded her son: ?You?re booked at the Broadway Assistance Center tomorrow night.?

The band talked, and decided ?it was the right thing? to honor their first commitment. That night at the homeless shelter turned out to be one of the best concerts they?d ever done, and they saw it as their path forward.

While the pair has no regrets about missing their chance at fame, to the women at Empowerment, they?re still rock stars.

Back to the concert there. Empowerment provides education, employment assistance, health, housing referrals, and support services to women who have endured incarceration, poverty, homelessness, or HIV/AIDS infection. But that wearying list of troubles didn?t affect the fun. A tiny air-conditioner wedged precariously in a cinder block wall chugged valiantly with minimal effect, but above its rumble, the song soared. Proudly, high and low voices blended for the ?a-weema-weh? chorus of a rousing ?Lion Sleeps Tonight.? With a rich mix of banjo and guitar, they were off on a roller coaster ride (with arm swings), then ?flying away? and ?wading in the water,? ?down by the riverside.?

This concert touched a key word in the Medicinal Strings/Okee Dokee philosophy: *empowering* the audience to be ?active and confident performers on the world?s stage,? not passive spectators.

?This can?t happen without you,? they explain at the start. Often in a crisis center, Mailander or Lansing invites the audience: ?You have a song or a story? Want to share it?? And people respond. When they ask for volunteers to play instruments during ?My Momma Don?t ?low No Music Makin? Here? audience members are eager to participate. A visiting confirmation class joins the regular clients, and an unlikely assortment makes music together.

Sonya had just served time in prison for meth charges but she shook her maracas (and hips) with glad abandon. Beside her, a candidate for confirmation and the son of a prominent Denver pediatrician played the castanets. Hoisting her tambourine, 19-year-old Kelli shook away worries about her three kids. Next in line, a small Asian girl, another confirmation candidate, played her triangle. It was a vibrant reminder of ?Here comes everybody!?

Perhaps it was also church in a broader sense, God?s people a choir larger than ever imagined. It connected with one of the oldest forms of worship, described in Psalm 150: ?Give praise with tambourines and dance, praise [God] with flutes and strings.?

Asked the devil?s advocate questions -- ?Will an hour of song really change lives? Create community? Bridge the gap between teenagers whose orthodontia costs more than a client?s yearly budget?? -- Lansing answers

thoughtfully.

?For them, as for us, awareness grows gradually. Maybe through this experience in eighth grade, a few service projects in high school, travel abroad in college, they?ll learn we all have the same emotions.?

Though Mailander and Lansing both shy away from the word ministry, they believe community is built through the energy exchange between performers and audience, art and ritual -- all experiences ?out of ordinary time.? Before the concert, Lansing chatted with a recovering alcoholic in the audience who had said she was having a bad day. But during ?This Land Is Your Land,? she closed her eyes and remembered her daddy?s banjo.

An easily accessible blend of Beatles and bluegrass, Guthrie and gospel, the repertoire stirs dreams of the civil rights movement and memories of simpler childhoods. Some of these songs helped slaves endure a horrific ordeal, or convinced settlers to build each other?s barns; their power persists.

Asked about any down side to their work, the boys admit that it?s tiring to set up and take down all their equipment -- they have no roadies. They?ve battled ?cheesy? stigmas attached to sing-alongs and children?s music. And sometimes they struggle with the tension between business and art: Answer e-mails about scheduling, or write a new song?

So let the reader decide -- if this isn?t ministry, how *does* one name their work? Restoring peoples? dignity, stretching their imaginations, lightening their load: Isn?t that what Jesus did?

[Kathy Coffey?s claim to fame is carpooling Justin Lansing to kindergarten. She also writes books and gives workshops.]

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