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DeSoto musicians gets 'Jazz'd UP!'



From Staff Reports

DESOTO—Strings of Color Orchestra is getting all "Jazz'd UP!" for their 4th Annual Black History Concert Feb. 26 at the Eisemann Center in Richardson. Two of the young musicians are from DeSoto: Joshua Perkins (cello, second year) and Kalif Perkins (cello, second year).

Adding their fabulous vocal talents to the evening are jazz singer Martha Burks and her band, and guest soloist Karen Sackey.

Designed for up and coming young musicians, Strings of Color Orchestra members range from middle school to college-level experience. Hopeful students from across north Texas auditioned for the orchestra last summer. Ron Planks, director of the award-winning Plano ISD Williams High School Orchestra, founded SOC in 2007.

"Strings of Color was born out of a desire to provide young string players of all racial backgrounds a venue to showcase their talent, with our target audience being string players within the African American community," Planks said. "I remember coming through my public school orchestra program and being one of maybe two African-Americans in my string program. But times have changed and you see so much diversity in all music classes, but especially the orchestra room."

Tickets for "Jazz'd UP!" are on sale now at www.eisemanncenter.com, or by phone at 972-744-4650. Ticket prices range from \$10 to \$40. The Eisemann Center is located at 2351 Performance Drive in Richardson, Texas 75082.

"Jazz'd UP!" is a preview of the orchestra's inaugural performance at the prestigious Oasis Jazz Awards in San Diego in March. Talent, timing and a bit of destiny converged, resulting in an invitation for Strings of Color Orchestra to perform at the festival. SOC is the first youth orchestra to play at the Oasis Jazz Awards.

"It is a wonderful opportunity but the pressure of being the first is daunting; however, we are definitely up for the challenge," Planks said. "If this is a success, and we believe it will be, the Oasis Awards wants to put a process in place to audition and invite youth groups and/or individuals to participate every year. We feel extremely blessed that Jean Braxton (Robinson) and Bill Paddock are such visionaries and are willing to give us a chance."

Planks originally contacted Robinson about booking Tom Braxton, a Dallas jazz musician, to play with SOC at their annual Black History concert in February 2011. Robinson asked his name and said she had gone to school with kids with the same last name. They discovered the students were Planks' uncle and his mother, for whom the Veta Louise Morriel Arts & Leadership Academy is named.

Before the end of the conversation, Robinson requested a DVD of the orchestra, which she shared with Oasis Awards owner and producer Bill Paddock.

"In process of talking to Ron, I was so impressed with what he had done with the kids and Strings of Color Orchestra," Robinson said. "We've always had the idea of bringing Oasis Jazz in the Classroom to



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reach out to students and let them perform with recording artists. It's a platform to keep music alive and let new jazz artists get some structured time with guys who have been doing it forever. This seemed a good way to get it ready for kickoff."

Strings of Color Orchestra will perform with vocalist Kenny Lattimore and musician Tom Braxton at the Oasis Jazz Awards matinee show. The awards show takes place Mar. 11-13, 2011 in San Diego. SOC will perform a matinee on Saturday, Mar. 12, 2011 at the San Diego-Hard Rock Hotel in the Edge Ballroom.

Not all smooth sailing

Along with the challenge of preparing music for the performance is the challenge of paying to get there. Each student's trip, including airfare, hotel and some meals will be about \$850.

"We are also responsible for paying the cartage fees to cart our larger instruments so everyone is aware that we may need to use any excess funds raised towards the instrument travel expenses," Planks said. "We are asking the parents to aim a little higher so that the kids have some additional spending money for meals that are not included in the package and any money they may want to use for souvenirs."

Besides fundraising concerts, SOC is raising money through the FirstGiving.com website. A page is set up for the orchestra and all of its members (www.FirstGiving.com/StringsOfColor). Donors can contribute to the group at large or to individual members.

To date, they've raised just over \$4,600, but there's a long way to go. With 26 members at \$850 per member, they need more than \$22,000 – and that's not including instrument travel expenses.

"We need to put down deposits along the way and March 12 isn't that far away! Frankly, we could use a lot more help," Planks said. "The kids are very excited and are looking forward to traveling and performing together. I think a different member asks me at each rehearsal if their favorite artist will be at the awards show. This has presented a wonderful opportunity for me to tell them about the jazz artists that will be in attendance as well as expose them to their music. It's an opportunity we don't want to miss."

Impacting students' lives

Strings of Color Orchestra has made a difference in the lives of its members.

"One young man who is in his fourth year with the group once said that SOC saved his life," Planks said. "Being able to perform with SOC helped him to take his mind off some of the problems that he was experiencing and it gave him renewed focus. Some have told me that they were undecided about their paths once they graduated from high school and several of them have gone on to major or minor in music. I believe that SOC has afforded many of the members' solo opportunities that their own school programs (because of the size of many public school music programs) could not offer."

As a public school teacher, Planks knows firsthand how difficult it can be to give the personal attention every student needs to excel on a string instrument.

"Time just doesn't allow it. SOC is smaller and easier to personally guide those that need the extra help. I'm pretty sure that our selection of music has been very rewarding for many of the members as well. I love performing the classical literature but I think more classrooms need to explore more literature from pop culture. I think the right mix can be very educational and rewarding for everyone involved," he said.

To help send the Strings of Color Orchestra to the Oasis Jazz Awards, visit www.FirstGiving.com/StringsOfColor or contact Planks at ron.planks@pisd.edu or by phone at 214-418-2399 .

