

Okemos group sings for the hungry

Performers give ‘every last penny’ to food banks in the community



Judy Putnam
Columnist
Lansing State Journal
USA TODAY NETWORK – MICH.

OKEMOS – The boys in the band asked me to ride the bus with them. I’ve waited decades for that invitation.

But instead of the rock ‘n’ roll entourage I once envisioned, it was a four-part harmony group singing Christmas carols to raise money for local food banks.

And instead of a sleek tour bus, their ride was a short, yellow school bus with legroom designed for elementary kids.

Still, the evening was fun, fast-paced and even a teeny bit bawdy at times for a church group as they sang alternate lyrics to “Comfort and Joy.” (More about that later.)

“Knights in Harmony,” is a group of male singers affiliated with the Knights of Columbus at St. Martha Catholic Church in Okemos. Since the group of eight or so fellows started putting their harmonies together in 2009, they’ve raised \$37,000 to feed people in our community.

I joined them Friday night on a tour of a dozen bars and restaurants in Williamston, Okemos and East Lansing, where managers and owners have approved the interruptions.

At 5:30 p.m., with the bus idling, the group warmed up to “White Christmas” before hitting the road.

“We’re begging for the food bank,” Frank Fortier, the group’s leader, tells the crowds before they launch into seasonal standards of “Let it Snow,” “We Wish You a Merry Christmas,” “Winter Wonderland,” and “Jingle Bell Rock.”

“It’s just amazing how generous people get when we sing them a couple of songs,” Fortier said. “Everything we collect to the last penny goes to the food banks.”

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Frank Fortier
Knights in Harmony leader

The group, wearing Santa caps, blue blazers and red scarves, sailed into each location, calling out “Merry Christmas” and ringing bells and singing “Jingle, Jingle, Jingle,” the opening to “Jingle Bells.”

The crowds on Friday night were enthusiastic as people clapped, sang and swayed to the songs. They also put lots of money into the buckets, handled by “elves,” Anne Readett and Jackie Fortier, Frank’s wife, who are members of St. Martha’s.

Mrs. Claus, Cherie Leece of Haslett, also passed the bucket while her real-life husband Larry, dressed as Santa, handed out candy canes to the patrons.

“It was great. I thought it was the radio,” said Matt Anson of Haslett after listening to “White Christmas” at Buddies Pub & Grill in Okemos.

Meredith Peltonen, a server and bartender at Old Nation in Williamston, said she found the performance delightful.

“They’re good. It’s my first time,” she said. “Everyone’s got their phone out. Everyone’s taking pictures. This is awesome.”

Krysten Lardie of Williamston caught them twice Friday night, once over drinks at The Bistro in Williamston and then over dinner at Williamston Pub and Grill.

She used to work at Buddies in Okemos and remembered when the group came in to sing for patrons there.

“It just feels Christmas-y,” she said. “Everyone always claps and cheers.”

At the Riverhouse Inn in Williamston, the group took a break from caroling to sing Happy Birthday to Leona Fraley of Webberville for her 86th birthday.

The group practiced each Tuesday in October and November to prepare for the caroling.

The singers have day jobs in a variety of professions. There are a few state employees. Former state Sen. Norm Shinkle of Williamston, an attorney, chairs



Frank Fortier, center, sings with the Knights in Harmony, a four-part harmony group, for customers at Old Nation Brewery on Friday in Williamston. The group, from St. Martha Catholic Church in Okemos, traveled to area restaurants singing to raise money for food banks. PHOTOS BY NICK KING/LANSING STATE JOURNAL



Anne Readett takes donations from a patron at The Bistro in Williamston. Knights in Harmony, from St. Martha Catholic Church in Okemos, traveled to Williamston restaurants to raise money for food banks.

Michigan’s 8th Congressional District Republican Committee. He’s in the group. Larry Leece, who plays Santa, is a life insurance salesman. His wife, Cherie, or Mrs. Claus, is a nurse.

David Mackson of Okemos, a packaging engineer, sings tenor.

“I enjoy singing, and I enjoy singing with a purpose. I can’t think of a better way to use your talents,” he said.

Bob Pigg of Okemos, who works for the Michigan Department of Agriculture, said he was leery of asking for donations at first. He got over it as he saw welcoming faces greet the singers.

“Part of our charm is we don’t stay around too long,” said Pigg, who sings bass.

One of their songs generated laughs and claps at the venues. It’s sung to “Comfort and Joy” but replaces the lyrics with a series of mishaps that happens when a gentlemen accidentally walks into the ladies room.

They collected \$1,889, Fortier said.

The money will go to food banks in Williamston, Okemos and Haslett. According to Feeding America, each \$1 donated to a food bank can help leverage a lot of food and keep it from being wasted. Each dollar can be turned into 10 meals.

Using that measure, the Knights in Harmony sang for the suppers of nearly 19,000 people.

Not too shabby for a group of singers out on a Friday night.

And I’m glad I finally got to ride the bus with the boys in the band.

If you want to catch them on Friday, Dec. 13, their planned stops are:

- 5:45 p.m. Spagnuolos Restaurant, Okemos
- 6 p.m. Buddies Pub and Grill, Okemos



Members of the Knights in Harmony load onto a bus on the way to their next stop on Friday in Williamston.

6:15 p.m. Henry’s Place, Okemos
6:30 p.m. Outback Steakhouse, Okemos
6:45 p.m. The Watershed, Haslett
6:55 p.m. Blue Gill Grill, Haslett
7:05 p.m. The Mayfair Bar, Haslett
7:30 p.m. The Pizza House, East Lansing
8:15 p.m. Ellison’s, East Lansing

Judy Putnam is a columnist with the Lansing State Journal. Contact her at (517) 267-1304 or at jputnam@lsj.com.

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LJ-GC0279224-10

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