



# Guys Sing

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BY TANYA RUTLEDGE

A throng of boys is gathered in the front hallway of Forestview Public School in Niagara Falls. A few have percussion instruments, someone has a guitar, but all of them are using their voices to belt out an energetic rendition of the memorable World Cup anthem “Waving Flag” by K’naan: *“When I get o-older, I will be stronger, just like a wa-a-ving flag.”*

But as popular as that song is, you won’t find any girls in this rehearsal. This musical gathering is just for “the guys.”

Led by their music teacher, Keith Tait, these boys are throwing gender stereotypes to the wind and are part of an all-boys singing group

at Forestview called “Guys Sing.” Tait started the all-boys choir in September 2010 to debunk the myth that boys don’t like to sing or be in choirs.

“I wanted to do something that isn’t normally seen in an elementary school setting – something that could make a difference in boys’ views towards singing,” says Tait.

Guys Sing is also part of Tait’s effort to align his classroom arts program with the school’s growth plan, which focuses on engaging reluctant learners and encouraging male students to embrace literacy outside of the classroom. “Music is just another avenue for literacy,” explains Tait. “We’re constantly reading in this group – sheet music, CD inserts, lyrics from videos.”

And the proof that Guys Sing is engaging is in the numbers. In the two short months since its inception, the group has grown to over 40 boys from grades 4 to 6 – nearly 75 percent of the male

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population in those grades. Tait has created a close-knit but casual environment where the boys choose the songs they're interested in singing and help figure out how they're going to sing them. On any given day, they might be singing tunes by Coldplay, Michael Jackson, The Police, or Bruno Mars.

Tait obtained funding from Imagineaction to purchase special black performance T-shirts. He involved the boys in the T-shirt design process from the beginning, but when the group saw them for the first time, they were beyond excited. "I seem to recall a lot of screaming and yelling," laughs Tait. "The shirts really cemented their bond and you could see that they really felt like a true singing group."

The boys wear their shirts with pride when they give their energetic performances at public concerts, retirement homes, and school board functions. Their premiere performance was at a high-profile District School Board of Niagara meeting packed with trustees, supervisory officers, and members of the public.

"When the guys finished their performance, the room leapt to its feet to give a standing ovation. The guys were so excited. It was the first time they had received that kind of reaction," recalls Tait. "Words can't express how important it is for students to have that kind of confidence and enthusiasm for learning."

Tait realizes that modelling also plays a big part in instilling a love of singing in the boys at his school. He could simply press "play" on the CD player but prefers to accompany Guys Sing on piano himself, sharing his musical energy and expertise through this role. And the boys frequently hear his classically trained tenor voice soaring over the piano. "There are times when I give them the full voice," Tait says. "I want them to occasionally hear a classical sound, in addition to a more modern one."



Frank Senese, a grade 12 co-op student from Westlane Secondary Public School, the school that most of the boys will be attending upon graduation, has also been a mentor and role model for the group. He has coached the boys on drums and also plays guitar for them. He says that being part of Guys Sing during his placement at Forestview has been extremely rewarding. "Guys Sing is a fun way of building confidence, friendship, and pride. Every time I see one of the students talking about Guys Sing, there's always a big smile on his face."

Indeed, it's clear that Guys Sing is having a positive effect. Amir, a grade 5 student, explains that "being in Guys Sing teaches us how to co-operate with each other and how important teamwork is!"

Josh, in grade 4, agrees: "What I like about Guys Sing is that it gives opportunities for guys to be in a choir of their own. Usually choirs are for girls and guys won't sing. We get great singing out of guys at Forestview."

Jason, a grade 6 student, explains why he loves being part of Guys Sing: "You get to learn a lot about singing. It inspires younger kids to sing also."

The excitement from their performances and from the members' own enthusiasm has trickled down to the younger boys at Forestview. Many can't wait until they reach grade 4, when they can join Guys Sing. Tait has seen the transformation in many of the present members of group and is excited for the future of the program at Forestview.

"The boys are often so inspired by the music that when I look up from playing, they are singing with their eyes closed, moving and dancing to the music. I get goose bumps when we're really singing well and I say to the boys, 'This is what your music can do to people. This is the proof right here!'" ✓