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(Neighbors)

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Choir program eyes expansion

**It worked in Harlem and organizers believe it can work here:
Using music to help guide young men toward a better life.**

By Claudia Vilato - Herald Writer



All Together: Ronald Dennis, artistic director of the South Florida Boys Choir, leads a group of boys in a song. Organizers want funds to expand the program.

PERRINE - The kids at the South Florida Boys Choir have plenty of rhythm ~ now they're hoping to avoid the blues.

Modeled after and affiliated with the world-famous Boys Choir of Harlem, the fledgling South Florida version is trying to raise enough money to grow from the after-school program it currently is to a full-curriculum private school.

Once established, organizers say the school will cater to low-income boys with a talent for singing - just as it is now doing for the 17 boys in the after-school program, which is based at R.R. Moton.

"The community is asking for it," said Horace Turnbull, who is vice president of the Harlem group and overseeing the development of the Miami program.

By all accounts, the Boys Choir of Harlem is a big success in its mission of giving boys an outlet for their singing talent and keeping them in school.

Officials say the choir boasts a 98 percent graduation rate among children who mostly come from low-income families.

Turnbull said the New York program has brought many in the community there a sense of hope.

So in order to bring South Florida something to sing about, Edward Hanna, founder of the Florida choir, managed to get Turnbull's attention focused on Perrine.

The goal is to start as a school with grades kindergarten through eighth grade that would emphasize academic achievement and family counseling, in addition to its showpiece music program

School organizers are on a money hunt, looking for grants, corporate donations, whatever they can find.

The boys are doing their part in the fundraising effort by performing all over town, at places like the Deering Estate and the Coconut Grove Yacht Club.

“I like seeing new places in Miami and meeting new people,” said 12-year-old alto Christopher Tomlin, who hopes to attend the school next year.

Charise Demps, mom to one of the boys in the choir and a volunteer for the program, said she thinks it's a worthy cause because it gives the boys structure and “exposes them to new opportunities.”

And school officials are hoping that just like in Harlem, parents in South Florida won't have to pay a cent.

The South Florida Boys Choir is partially funded by the Corporate Tax Credit Scholarship Program, which gives low-income parents a choice as to where they send their kids to school.

But it only provides \$3,500 per student, not enough to support a school like this, which will cost \$6,200 per student once it goes full-time.

“We are not a charter school,” said John Johnson, executive director of the choir. “We will always need money.”

Despite having to constantly deal with the

constraints of a tight budget, board members are hopeful.

“We wouldn't be involved in it if we weren't,” said Hanna.

“It takes a lot of commitment,” said Demps, but as a parent, she says she'll do whatever it takes to get the school on its feet.

And the obstacles facing the choir don't seem to be coming from the kids. Ten-year-old Juan Ortiz's favorite part of the program is “the intensity of learning new music.”

Keontre Sweets, an 11-year-old soloist for the choir, can get up in front of a crowd with no trouble at all.

Veteran music teacher and artistic director for the choir, Ron Dennis enjoys teaching the boys because they have such a “raw talent” for music.

“The chore is getting it out of them,” Dennis said. “They are capable.”

For more information on the South Florida Boys Choir, call 305-234-8769, ext. 104.
