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Pitch perfect: Area coaches help aspiring performers to find their best voices

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BY JASON WEBBER / THE BLADE



Kane Schermbeck, 13, of Maumee takes a voice lesson Nov. 30 at Forte Music School in Toledo. THE BLADE/JEREMY WADSWORTH

"I just really love teaching and working with students who are developing their voice," said Katharine Murphy, who has taught voice for the last five years and currently teaches at the Studio Connection in Bowling Green. "I love working with all age groups and all backgrounds.

"My background is in opera and classical music, but I've taught a lot of jazz, a lot of Broadway and musical theater, but I want to know what their goals are. Everybody is a unique individual so each lesson has to be tailored for each student. So every lesson looks a little different. Some students need to focus on working on intonation. Some students need to work on breath support and control. It really depends on what they're focused on and where they want to go with their voice."

The first thing Stanton does when he takes on a new student is find out what makes the aspiring singer want to sing in the first place.

"The most important thing is to form a relationship with a student because if they don't like to come in here, I won't see them enough to teach them anything," said Stanton, who has been teaching voice lessons for more than 50 years. "I really want to make them feel comfortable. Then I listen to them sing and I try to pick out everything that's good about their voice.

say things like, 'You know, that's really beautiful. We need more of that in your singing,' rather than the other way around. I like to go for the positive approach and eventually they leave the bad habits behind and all the good things we just enhance."

There they were, master and pupil, eyes locked in a hypnotic, almost ritualistic stare. Voice instructor Jim Stanton sat behind the large black keyboard and played the melody of Lennon and McCartney's "Blackbird," as Kane Schermbeck, 13, sang the lyrics.

It's just another day on the job for Stanton, a vocal instructor for **Forté Music School in Toledo.**

Northwest Ohio is home to several vocal coaches like Stanton, who teach breath control, voice projection, and other elements of singing. Coaches work with a wide range of students and say they cater each lesson to their abilities and objectives.



"You have to bring the song alive," Stanton said. "Otherwise you're just another singer."

Kane, his student during a recent lesson at Forte, has been interested in singing since 2017. He began studying with Stanton in 2019.

"When I sing I feel really good," said Kane, who cites Elvis Presley and the Beatles as his vocal muses. "It's really great," the young crooner continued. "I love it here."

Can anyone learn how to sing? Stanton says yes.

"Everybody can learn at some level and they can all enjoy it and it can be a great experience for everybody," Stanton said. "You can learn to sing on key. You have to be patient and take a few notes at a time. Don't take difficult songs, take simple songs. Maybe even something like 'Mary Had a Little Lamb,' something where there's only a few notes.

"Music is about enjoyment. It's not all about performing. Everyone can get something out of music."

Toledo icon Jean Holden has been gracing stages all around the Midwest and beyond since the 1960s, and she has been giving private voice lessons for more than 50 of her 82 years.

"My passion has always been sharing my gift with other people. For a fee of course," said Holden, who still teaches and performs regularly.

Holden said the first thing she does when working with an aspiring singer is to find out about their singing goals.

"I don't want to impose the way I sing on them. A lot of people come to me because they heard me sing and they say, 'I want to do what you do.' But I want them to tell me what it is they want to do so I can help them and guide them into doing what they're choosing to do," said Holden, who has worked with everyone from rock 'n' roll singers to opera chanteuses.

Holden began singing in Toledo area supper clubs and nightclubs in 1966, and started teaching voice lesson privately that same year. In 1975, she was the vocal coach for the cast of Hair at the University of Toledo. Today, Holden still enjoys teaching people how to use their voices to sing.

"I enjoy watching people enjoy what they would like to do. That is really my passion — sharing," Holden said. "Music is such a wonderful thing. Being able to do music and sing is very healing. I think it's a healing of the body and the mind to be able to do that and to share with people so they're not damaging their vocal chords.

"That's the most important thing — that people sing the correct way."

Stanton, a Toledo native, graduated from Whitmer High School in 1968 and spent many years of his music career as the musical director for churches. He wrote and directed several musicals related to Christmas and Easter.

"I wasn't in musicals myself back in those days," Stanton said. "Musicals are really big nowadays but it wasn't like that when I was a kid. They did musicals at school, but everybody didn't want to be in them. Nowadays people want to be in them. That's really what people are interested in these days — to sing with a purpose."

Stanton said the key to successful singing is expression. Lots of it.

