

Chippewa Valley music teacher honored for work with autism fundraising



Chippewa Valley High School Choir Director James Pecar, right, was honored for his work with autism, including an annual fundraising concert.

Photo by Donna Agusti

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CLINTON TOWNSHIP — With friends and family that have autism, Chippewa Valley High School Choir Director James Pecar learned early on that music had a positive impact on autistic people.

For the past five years, Pecar has organized and overseen the “A Capella for Autism” concert that brings students of all ages together to raise money for the Macomb St. Clair Autism Society of America chapter as well as the school’s music program.

In September, Pecar was honored for his work with the autistic community by receiving the Making a Difference Award at the Play-Place for Autistic Children’s third annual awards gala.

“Growing up, I had a lot of interaction with people who had autism,” Pecar said. “One of my good friend’s younger sibling has autism, and my little cousin has autism. My main form of communication with my cousin is to sing, and I watched the power that music had with these kids.

“These people may not necessarily have the access to music, so we want to give them funding to get those experiences.”

Play-Place for Autistic Children, based in Sterling Heights, works to provide a fun and safe space for families that live with autism. Executive Director Shell Jones said the annual gala is the organization’s biggest fundraiser and helps raise awareness for their mission.

Looking at the work Pecar has done the past years with the concert, Jones said they wanted to show him how much of an impact he was having.

“He is definitely a change agent in the special needs community,” Jones said. “He offered time and talent to go through this channel that is so universal with music. We felt that was very admirable and wanted to celebrate him for his good intentions.”

The “A Capella for Autism” concert is held each April and includes high school, middle school and college students. Pecar said this year he had 170 high school students, 50 middle school students and about 20 college students.

He also was able to include about 30 elementary students. Each year, the concert raises up to \$14,000.

Pecar said he started using music to work with autistic people while in college at the University of Florida, where he first developed the idea of a charity concert. When he came to Chippewa Valley, he brought the concept with him.

The idea wouldn’t work, he said, without the willing participation of the students. Along with the concert, the students also volunteer at the Out & About Autism 5K at Stony Creek Metropark.

“The students do research about what autism is and how music helps,” he said. “This empowers the students to do more with their voices and create something bigger than themselves, and they take strong ownership over that. This award shouldn’t have my name on it, but the community’s name.”

Pecar said he was shocked when he was told he would receive the award and the experience was a different one for him at the gala as he said he was used to having his back to the audience while conducting.

Pecar was also honored in 2015 with the Stephen Tsai Award from the Michigan Autism Society.

People may not realize how closely they are affected by autism, Pecar said, and he hopes each year his concert can bring awareness to everyone dealing with autism.

“A lot of these kids know a number of students who have autism, but a lot of people don’t realize we have autism as part of our community and part of our people,” Pecar said. “Some autistic students in the past have said how big of an impact the concert had on them and how important it was that they were welcomed.”

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