



Photo courtesy Rising Stars Camp



BUILDING CONFIDENCE AT SHOW CHOIR SUMMER CAMPS

by Cassidy Clevenger

Summer camps are like Coen Brothers' films: instant classics. There is something about camps that seems to offer an instant nostalgia; it almost seems as if, while the memories are being formed, the moments are already missed. Show Choir Camps are no exception, and may even be the epitome of this universal experience. *Productions Magazine* spoke with Rising Stars and Dominion Show Choir Camps about their demographics, experiences, and creative processes.

Who Are Rising Stars and Dominion?

Rising Stars is a week-long show choir camp in Illinois that includes students from three-to-eighteen years old. Erin Paul, director and co-owner of Rising Stars, shared that the program has been running for twenty-four years, and many of the students have grown up attending this camp. Many former students are now enrolling their own children in the program, and they are bestowed with the loving title of "grandstudent." Though there are several students who come in with no experience performing, Paul noted, many campers participate in local show choirs, dance groups, school and community theater, as well as other performance based organizations throughout the year.

Rising Stars offers a wide array of classes for various age groups, with Young Rising Stars (Grades 2nd-5th), Junior Rising Stars (Grades 6th-8th), and the Mini Rising Stars (ages preschool-1st Grade) being the most popular. A considerable number of Rising Stars students have gone on to pursue careers in music performance and/or education, and many campers have dreams of Broadway or film. In fact, one of the recent Alumni moved to

New York at the end of last summer to pursue this dream and has already been picked up by a production.

Dominion Show Choir camp is based just outside Richmond, Virginia, and attracts both local and out-of-state students; those who travel can stay with a host family during the week-long camp. The selection this camp has to offer is truly awe-inspiring. There is everything from hip hop, to swing, to improv, to beatboxing; there is even an opportunity for students to enroll in private voice lessons. Too often there is the misconception that show choirs only do show tunes, so seeing the way Dominion and Rising Stars incorporate other genres and mainstream dance styles helps break the mold of what show choir "should" be.

Students at Dominion range from fourth grade through college students, and their most popular groups are middle schoolers and high schoolers. The local middle school does not offer a show choir, so younger students who watched their older siblings perform are especially eager to strap on their character shoes and get to work. Something worth noting is how there are boy performers

in all the age groups. I do not know about you all, but as a former theatre kid myself, it is refreshing and exciting to hear about all the young men interested in show choir.

What Are the Camps Like to Attend?

According to Rising Stars' Erin Paul, "One of the beautiful things about Rising Stars is that our talented directors and choreographers are able to tailor the camp experience to the unique needs of the group." The goal is to challenge the campers to unlock their potential by pushing themselves to explore their preconceived notions of ability; thanks to the safe, fun, supportive environment, many students find themselves accomplishing more than they would have originally thought possible. Thanks to the help of the directors and choreographers, students feel comfortable taking risks and reaching their full abilities. Paul explained, "Our goal is for every camper to walk away with a positive experience. For some the dancing is a challenge, for others memorizing music with different vocal parts can be tough, but campers work hard and always surprise themselves with what they are able to accomplish in just one week!"

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Naturally, there have been countless showstoppers, but every year there is one number that is particularly close to the hearts of the campers and director. Since 1996, the camp has closed with the same number. Campers across ages perform “Remember Me This Way” as a group. The song is designed to remind every parent to take a moment to appreciate how fleeting childhood is, and how we should treasure every moment. As the years pass, the song seems to take on a deeper meaning. As mentioned, Rising Stars is intended to be a cross-generational, community-filled experience. Alumni and parents are invited to sing along, and during the closing number, the directors see it as a privilege to watch the children and their alumni parents enjoying the same love of music; Paul explained, there is “a touch of magic in the Rising Stars experience.”

At Dominion, Sandi Thomas, Clover Hill High School Choral Director and Director of award-winning show choirs New Dimensions and Iridescence, noted that, though students adore the variety and appreciate the intensity of the camp, their younger students can struggle with the length of the rehearsals. Let’s face it: Middle schoolers are not known

for their attention spans; however, as the camp nears its end, the students become so involved in the workshops, they are requesting *more* rehearsal time—they become invested in putting on a phenomenal showcase. And as Deanna Friedel, Clover Hill High School Booster Club President, noted, learning all the choreography in five days is an impressive feat at any age. To help the campers feel as confident as possible before going onstage, Dominion offers additional assistance with the routines outside of workshops. Thomas stated, by the end of the camp, the students’ performance “blows [her] mind!”

What is Coming this Summer?

Much like with any successful program, transitions are needed with growth. The camp has expanded to two new locations—Mundelein and Lake Villa. Rising Stars began in Wheaton and has continued to thrive in this area, and they are hoping to continue to attract more students across the Chicagoland area. Rising Stars’ original founder, Julie Barger Petrandio, joined with Erin Paul, who is a Rising Stars alumni. Paul has been a part of the camp since its inception in 1996. Paul has progressed from camper, to student staff member, to

director of the Wee Rising Stars group. Finally, after earning her degree in Music Performance, she is now the co-owner of the camp with Julie Barger Petrandio. To highlight the strong sense of community Rising Stars exudes, Paul’s daughter was the first “grand-student” to attend camp.

Dominion also has some exciting developments. Their locality has started offering teachers professional development points for attending the camp and learning how Dominion Show Choir Camp is run. There are certain stipulations put forth by the county, but nevertheless, it is exciting for like-minded colleagues to earn these much needed points. Thomas is thrilled that the school system sees the value in what the directors are doing at camp.

The Creative Team

Rising Stars is clearly proud of their creative team, which involves local talent as well as top professionals in their fields. When selecting music for the productions, the team takes a collaborative, eclectic approach by pulling from a variety of genres. But like most directors know, choosing music can be a tricky business, especially when working with young students, the creative team needs to

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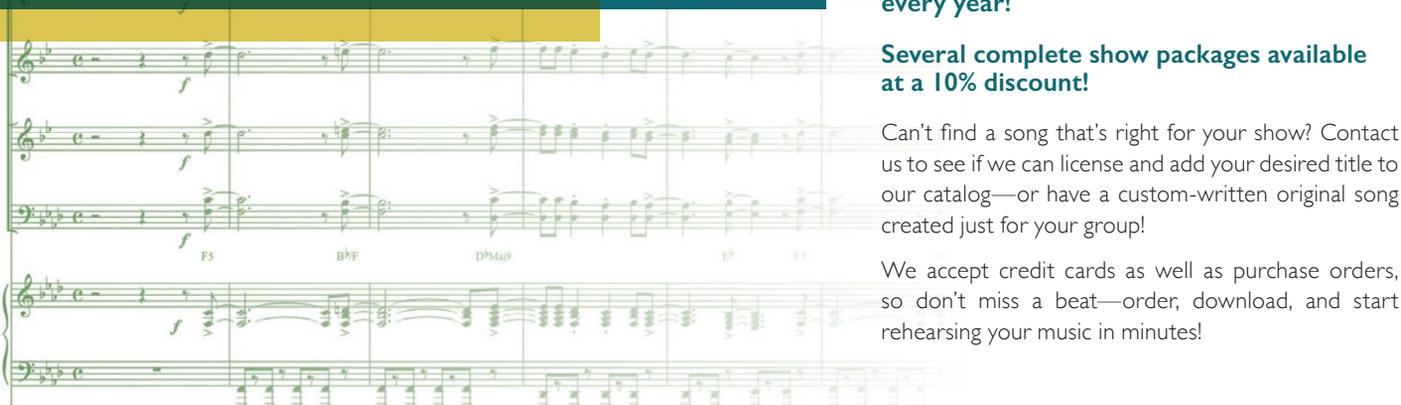
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pick songs that appeal to campers and the parents alike. Founder Julie Barger Petrando is a master at crafting the playlist. From lyrical to lively, Rising Stars covers the gamut.

Dominion takes a slightly different approach. At this camp, the choreographers are paired with a director, and they develop the pieces together. Thomas explained, they work together to create their own little mini-shows, and have complete autonomy over their sets.

What are the Challenges?

Despite Rising Stars having an impressive twenty-four season run so far, still the biggest challenge they face is getting the word about their camp out into the public. Considering their recent expansion, they are eager to be able to share the venues with new up-and-coming performers. If anyone is interested in starting a Rising Stars program in their local area, Erin Paul expressed a warm welcome, and she is happy to help with development. For more information, email info@risingstar-scamp.com.

Dominion was able to find lightning in a bottle out of a situation that they were originally concerned may be a struggle. A couple of years ago when they introduced their youngest

performers, there was some trepidation. In addition to their minimal attention span, middle schoolers are also not known for their filter. Thomas was a little wary about how all the students might interact, but the integration of elementary school students was nothing short of magical; Thomas was so glad Dominion decided to include younger students, because the positive energy and excitement they contributed was utterly contagious.

Additionally, another concern Friedel expressed was ensuring that all students were able to showcase their talents. With group sizes comprised of about fifty students, it can be difficult to highlight every students' gifts, but the directors and choreographers work hard to highlight each student's ability. "The campers work so hard all week," explained Friedel, "we want everyone to shine on the final evening!"

Advice for Future Camp Directors

Much like in real estate, the mantra for success can be summarized in one keyword: People, people, people. Dominion's Friedel explained, the secret to a successful camp is a passionate creative group and staff. When the teachers love what they are doing, this will trickle down and ignite the passion in

the students. And by offering a multitude of different workshops, the camp can help guarantee that there will be something to interest any and all students.

Aleise Matheson, the Dominion Show Choir Camp Chair, also emphasized the importance of offering individual vocal lessons, which is something the students truly appreciate. Fiedel also added that having an ice cream social couldn't hurt anything.

The love all the directors and leadership have for their students is palpable. Paul with Rising Stars as well as Fiedel, Thomas, and Matheson from Dominion all raved about their students, and how much pride they feel at the end of camp.

Show choir is so much more than an extra-curricular activity—it is a community. These camps are places where students learn their strengths, gain self-confidence, and develop friendships that can carry well into adulthood.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Cassidy Clevenger is a Samford University alum. She is currently in graduate school at Samford in the MSW program, while working as a staff writer.

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