





# COMMUNITY, EXCELLENCE, & COMPETITION

In 2019, the Vestavia Hills Singers  
finished the competition  
season undefeated.

by Lisa Gibbs, Ed.D.



PHOTO BY ANGEL BAKER / VESTAVIA HILLS SINGERS

**IN** 2019, the Vestavia Hills Singers finished the competition season undefeated. Dr. Megan Rudolph, who led the choir program at the high school from 2000-2021, attributed the success of the group to the dedication of each student working for the success of the whole. During a 2019 interview, Dr. Rudolph explained her approach to teaching as well as the value of arts education. “We learn how to work together on something bigger than ourselves. We learn how to always realize that we are a part of a bigger chain, and if we’re not pulling our weight, we’re not going to be successful.” Building personal character, supporting good citizenship, and using constructive criticism effectively were hallmarks of Dr. Rudolph’s choir department.

The Singers continued their winning streak in 2020, and Dr. Rudolph again mentioned the goal of developing compassionate people who take pride in what they do. In a local newspaper, Dr. Rudolph emphasized that students “are taught to learn during the process of creating the performances,” and that they “learn to be part of something bigger than themselves and to not underestimate their own potential.” There is a sense of family within this show choir, where the students support each other through both good and hard times, and support others by cheering on rival schools at competitions. Dr. Rudolph finished the 2020-2021 school year on that high note before moving on to a position at Miles College.

Taylor Stricklin and Noah Burns are embracing Dr. Rudolph’s commitment to students, and they are embracing the importance of arts education. Taylor



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and Noah were hired in 2020 and 2021, respectively, and are continuing the tradition of community, excellence, and competition at Vestavia Hills High School in Vestavia Hills, Alabama.

During the busy season of holiday performances and exams, I interviewed Taylor and Noah. What follows is a transcript of our conversation:

**Thank you both so much for agreeing to this interview! I appreciate your time. Let's start with some background information. Were you in show choir in high school?**

**Noah** - I was in show choir for three years at Bumpus Middle School and three years at Hoover High School.

**Taylor** - I was in show choir for 7 years throughout middle and high school at Simmons Middle School and Hoover High School.

**Do you have a favorite "show choir moment" for you personally?**

**Noah** - My favorite show choir memory is performing at a festival at Disney World. I got to sing a solo during the guys' number in the middle of Downtown Disney, and it was truly an unforgettable experience!

**Taylor** - My favorite show choir moment was during my time teaching at Dauphin Junior High School in Enterprise, Alabama. My first year there, we had a lot of members who were new to show choir, and we spent most of that year learning how to perform. My second year, we returned lots of students and ended up sweeping a competition! I'll never forget everyone's excitement when they realized their hard work had been recognized.

Performing a solo at Disney World and winning competitions after only two years are definitely incredible experiences!

**What, if anything, has changed between then and now for high school show choir?**

**Taylor** - Everything has become bigger. When I was in high school, we didn't have any costume changes or set pieces. The show choir world has become more about the overall production and immersing the audience in the world of your show.

**Noah** - I was also in show choir in high school, and we had limited costuming and set design, too. Things have definitely changed regarding the presentation of songs and dance!

**Let's shift gears a bit and talk about the COVID-19 pandemic. Did you discover a particular strategy or two for teaching and listening during the days of remote teaching or hybrid teaching?**

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We were lucky to have been in some form of face-to-face teaching last school year. We began the year on a hybrid, alternating schedule, and then we went fully in person after the first nine weeks of school. During the hybrid period, we had students who were at home join the in-person class via Google Meet. They were expected to have their music out and to be going through the choreography as if they were in class. We also utilized part tracks more than we ever had to ensure that students who were at home had the tools they needed to be able to come back and pick up right where we were.

### **How did you engage the students during that time?**

We really tried to engage the students who were online by having conversations that sometimes had nothing to do with show choir or even music for that matter. Even though choir is often an important release for our students, last year we noticed that students who were quarantined or fully

remote needed to communicate with their peers because they had been isolated for so long.

Communication is such an important part of our lives. Those spontaneous conversations that happen in class do serve the purpose of connecting students in community with each other.

### **Fall 2021 started fully in-person, correct?**

Correct!

### **Is there an anecdote you can share of how the 2021 school year started for you and the students? The emotions, the approach to planning and teaching, etc.?**

There was certainly a sense of excitement and expectancy in the air during the start of the year. It was easy to tell that the students were eager to get back to some sense of normalcy, and we were excited to try to help provide that in the best way possible. Our goal at the start of the year was to reestablish the sense of community

that was so difficult to cultivate during the pandemic. We were intentional about spending time geared specifically toward strengthening the bond between ourselves and the students, as well as between choristers. After all, choral singing is innately communal and therefore meant to be done together!

We also spent a good bit of time at the beginning of the year working strictly on building a strong, confident, healthy sound in all of our groups. Students needed to feel and hear again what it was like to sing uninhibited by a virtual or spatial barrier. All in all, we wanted to instill confidence in our students, reestablish good rehearsal techniques, and create a positive learning environment that would carry into the rest of the year!

I'm sure it was a goosebump-producing and heartfelt-inspiring experience to be together in person again and singing after such a long time apart!

### **Dr. Megan Rudolph led the department for 21 years before moving on to a new position at Miles College in 2021. In what ways were you able to smoothly transition so the students were comfortable?**

We are so thankful for Dr. Rudolph and her years of service to this school and community. She truly established a tradition of choral excellence at Vestavia, and we are striving every day to maintain and build on that tradition.

One of the ways that we are able to give the students some sense of continuity during this transition period is by not straying too far from the normal experiences and performances that the students have become accustomed to in the past. For example, we are hosting the ACDA Contempo Festival, traveling to familiar competitions, taking a Spring trip, and participating in Celebrate the Season (the Vestavia



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Hills High School Performing Art Department's Annual Holiday Celebration).

Another way we are hoping to smooth the transition is by communicating and expecting similar expectations that were established by Dr. Rudolph. Students are expected to lead by example and "do their due diligence" as she would often say!

Obviously, things will not be exactly the same as they have been, but that isn't our intention. We hope to be good stewards of the program that Dr. Rudolph left behind and to treat the students in a way that makes them feel heard and respected as we figure out what the new normal looks like!

#### **What do you have planned for the Vestavia Hills Singers for the rest of the school year?**

We are currently in the process of building and cleaning our show for the 2022 competition season. We are extremely excited to travel and compete, as well as to host the ACDA Contempo

Festival (an annual showcase of non-traditional choral groups from around the state and the Southeast) in mid-January.

During and after the competition season, 'Singers' also works on concert music to be performed at state assessment, concerts, and community events!

Acknowledging there will be differences, communicating with the students, and encouraging excellence through this transition will continue Dr. Rudolph's legacy of community, excellence, and competition. Congratulations on your successes through the challenges of the pandemic and the transitional period of beginning your careers at Vestavia Hills High School!

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**ABOUT THE AUTHOR:** PUPN staff writer Lisa Gibbs earned her Ed.D. in Higher Education Administration in 2018. She is an advocate for arts, particularly dance, in education and for increasing the financial well-being of artists through financial education.

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