

A piano worth saluting

Written by BILL SCHANEN IV
Wednesday, 02 January 2013 18:21 -

<http://www.ozaukeepress.com/images/010313/pianoSM.png> **Saturday concert to celebrate community effort that gave PWHS a Steinway grand**

The recently purchased Steinway grand piano that graces the stage in the Port Washington High School auditorium sounds beautiful, pianists who have played it say.

But what the piano says about the community that purchased it is even more compelling, they say.

“This is an absolutely wonderful instrument, and it wasn’t purchased with a single donation from a big company. It was purchased with a lot of small donations from a lot of people in this community who appreciate music and music education,” Port High Choral Director Dennis Gephart said. “It’s really a wonderful gift.”

It’s fitting, then, that the nearly three-year effort to raise \$65,000 will be celebrated with a community piano concert at 7 p.m. Saturday, Jan. 5, in the high school auditorium at 427 W. Jackson St. The concert is free and open to the public.

A reception for donors will begin at 6 p.m.



It’s also fitting that most of the musicians performing are from the community that donated money to buy the piano. Local professional pianists and piano teachers who will play are Francine Barclay, Drew Rutz, Mary Van Pietersom, Pru Palecek, Lori Ann Locke and Scott Schmidt.

Also performing will be Port High student Joe Babcock, longtime piano player and president of the Port High Music Boosters Linda Guokas, Port High graduate Emily Schultz, who is a piano teacher in the Madison area, and Amanda McFall, a freelance pianist from Milwaukee who is the regular accompanist for Port High choirs.

“This isn’t just a piano for high school music students,” Gephart said. “It’s a piano for all students in the district and for all the people in this community.”

The Model D Concert Grand Steinway — the largest sold by the respected piano maker — was delivered in September and replaced the school’s nearly century-old piano.

“I literally couldn’t pick some pieces for my students because they were impossible to play on a piano that was nearly 100 years old,” Gephart said.

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But with no money in the school budget, the music department made do with the old piano until the Music Boosters launched its most ambitious fundraiser to date.

“We worked at this for almost three years,” said Guokas, who has been president of the group throughout the campaign. “The community really got behind this effort.”

The fundraiser began with a Key Contributor campaign in which donors “bought” keys on a large plaque that resembles a piano in the auditorium hallway and continued from there.

“We’re talking about a lot of donations of anywhere from \$20 on up,” Gephart said.

In keeping with theme of a community effort, Port Washington residents Russ and Yvonne Klotz donated the Key Contributor plaque, which Mr. Klotz, a technology education teacher, made.

Later in the campaign, Eagle Scout candidate TJ Koopman, a Port High student, made a storage container for the new piano.

During the course of the fundraiser, the Music Boosters incorporated as a nonprofit organization, which allowed donors to make tax-deductible contributions.

There was also a bit of good fortune involved in the search for a new piano. Working through a broker, Gephart found the Steinway, which was owned by a pianist who selected it from the Steinway factory in New York and kept it in his Chicago home.

Not only was the 13-year-old piano, which is signed by Henry Steinway, in perfect condition and in the prime of its life, it was priced right. Gephart said the owner was committed to selling the piano to an educational institution and agreed to a price of about \$62,000, tens of thousands of dollars less than the instrument costs new.

The Music Boosters did the rest.

“That’s what’s great about teaching in a community like this,” Gephart said. “If there’s a need and you can articulate it and justify it, this community will come together to support it.

“We needed this piano. It helps our students. It helps our community. It helps all of us understand our culture.”

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Image Information: PORT WASHINGTON HIGH SCHOOL'S recently purchased Steinway grand piano will be the center of attention during a Saturday, Jan 5, concert to celebrate the community campaign that raised money to buy the instrument. Gathered around the piano shortly after it was delivered in September were Choral Director Dennis Gephart (sitting) and music students (clockwise, from left) Natalie Howard, Danielle Dawson, Samantha Stark, Regina Duarte, Danielle Klinski, Allie Graf, Cassi Pentony, Nikky Klauck and Hannah Tarrence.

Ozaukee Press file photo