

Harmony Bio



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Teen Suicide is an awful problem in our society. Nothing good comes from suicide.....usually. Joanne Klauke-LaBelle was a music teacher who taught music to inner city youth. One day, a young fellow had come over to talk to her, but she was busy teaching. She assured the boy that she would call him later, when she was finished. Later never came. He left her home and committed suicide.

The loss was overwhelming, so Joanne began to research suicide, its causes, and preventative measures. Harmony was formed as a unique way to reach out to at risk youth, and offer them an alternative to suicide. It's mandate, and mission was created to help youth realize their intrinsic value in a community, as well as offer them a creative way to vent and express themselves. The first group of twelve Harmony students began in Joanne's living room in nineteen ninety-five. The youth were given programs free of financial fees, pre-requisites, and no waiting lists. The youth were required to "pay forward" what they had been given. For each hour of programming they received they owed one hour of community service. This was a very special and critical element of the program. Suicidal youth do not understand that they themselves matter. The pay it forward events helped the youth to reach and realize how much of an impact they had on a community. It also helped bridge the gap between the community and the youth as a whole.

Harmony was developed to allow the students to express themselves in a safe environment; they had a simple mandate – to teach the students to create harmony within themselves, each other, and the world in which they lived.

By the end of the third year, the group had expanded to more than two hundred students and they had begun to use a local church to practice for their concerts. In 2003, Harmony found a new home and expanded their programs to include instrumental lessons, vocal lessons, band, choir, stomp and theory, and the lessons are for young and adult students. It was in this year that Harmony was also invited to participate in Unisong Canada and represented Lambton County and the province of Ontario on Parliament Hill in Ottawa for Canada Day 2003. This was an exciting and rewarding concert for all of the children involved.

This performance was just one of over two hundred concerts that the Harmony choirs perform each year. Any request for a concert is happily fulfilled, whether the group listening is a small group of senior or a large group in a concert hall. The performance serves a few different purposes. Primarily for the youth to give back to the community that has supported them, but also to build their self-esteem and confidence. Performing in public teaches the youth to be confident, and the roar of an audience creates a powerful response in the youth. They begin to believe in themselves. Finally, the gift of giving the arts back to the community allows individuals from lower-socio economic sectors of the community to enjoy the arts. Often this segment of communities are not privileged enough to afford to attend artistic

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performances. At the end of the performance, Harmony allows individuals to make a good will offering. This is optional. Often people want to then pay it forward for what they received. These donations have created the sustainability of the organization. So much so that Harmony has grown immensely.

Harmony expanded and developed through the various needs of the youth. A STOMP program was created to give children the opportunity to express their feeling and pent up emotions with a constructive and entertaining outlet. This program was then offered to the local schools with great success. Harmony has also been very active in paying-it-forward with other local charities. They have volunteered with many organizations to help them achieve their fundraising goals; some of these charities are the Cancer Society, the Fight Hunger Drive, Goodwill, Pathways Centre for Youth and the St. Clair Youth Services to name a few. Harmony believes in giving whenever and wherever possible. The needs in our society today are great and we need to help those less fortunate than ourselves. This philosophy also helps to show the children of this program that there are many people who are less fortunate than themselves and thereby creates a sense of empathy within each child. Furthermore, it takes a community to raise a child. No individual or single organization can meet all the needs for the youth and their families. Together, anything is possible.

When Hurricane Katrina struck in the States, Harmony looked to help anyway that they could. So, Joanne took a group of Harmony volunteers to Houston and brought with them some instruments and drumsticks to give to the smallest and most helpless victims of the hurricane. Joanne knows the healing power of music, and knew that music could help the children of Katrina to cope with all of their loss and their depression and hopelessness. Along with the instruments Harmony sent much needed baby supplies, hockey bags, and essentials to the volunteers, to ensure that the materials arrive in the hands of the victims as soon as possible. Further to this, Harmony put on a large benefit concert, with well known Canadian entertainers, and donated all the proceeds to the families of Katrina.

Shortly after Katrina, Joanne was featured on the Live with Regis and Kelly daytime talk show, followed by the award for Volunteer of the Year, and Canadian Woman of Distinction, from Flare Magazine. The International press spurred a huge rise in popularity for the organization, and requests on opening centers began to flood in. The folks that Joanne had met in Houston now placed increased pressure on Harmony to establish itself as an International Organization, and open in Houston. In January of 2007 Harmony became an International charity, and shortly thereafter began programs in the youth detention centers in Houston Texas.

Again, Harmony was outgrowing this facility and needed a larger building in which to expand. They moved to another facility in September 2006 and Harmony now offers thirty four different programs and the building that they now occupy has twenty five rooms and allows Harmony the continued growth along with providing a board room free of charge to any organization requesting its use. This is another way that Harmony continues to pay-it-forward as an organization.

Harmony is not funded by any government subsidies, so they rely on donations from the local business community and the private sector. It is run completely with volunteers with over 50 full time volunteers and many more who give hours during special fundraising events. Harmony has been recognized with the June Caldwell Award for Volunteerism. This award is very special because it

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represents the commitment and love that the community has for Harmony in the hours that are willingly given for the at risk youth in our community.

This philosophy is spreading to other communities in Ontario including Strathroy, Morrisburg, and West-Lorne. These centers have opened due to youth suicide. Many other communities are in the process of opening centers across Ontario. Pembroke, Watford, and Hamilton, Cornwall are all striving to get the programs open in early to mid 2008. In the US, Waco, San Antonio, and Port Huron are in the process of opening Harmony Centers.

Harmony has also expanded programming into two First Nations Communities, Walpole and Kettle and Stoney Point. We are focusing on our anti-bullying programs as well as the regular Harmony programs in these two communities.

Further to this Harmony began working with a private English school in Korea called Yes Young Do. Harmony and Yes Young Do have begun an international partnership. Korean youth come to Canada to participate in our school systems, and Harmony provides a cultural opportunity to engage with Canadian youth in after-school programming. This partnership is evolving to include many different summer programs as well.

Sarnia site now serves as the International Head office for Harmony, as well as the Sarnia Harmony Centre. Harmony is not finished reaching out to youth. It was said that it is impossible to open an organization that does not charge any fees, has no waiting lists, and no pre-requisites. The concept was challenged by different organizations, levels of government, and funders. Harmony was told they are not sustainable, but after thirteen years, thousands of youth offered programs, lives changed, communities built up, and growth that is immeasurable, it is good to know that miracles can happen, if you only believe.