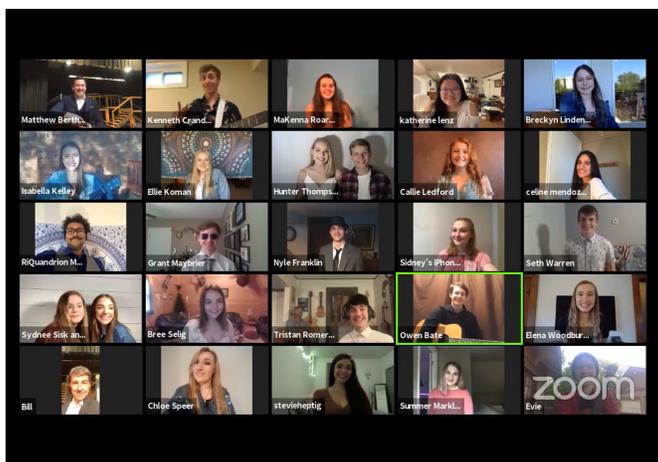


Interview with Teacher Matthew Berthot

Submitted by Kansas State Department of Education

For two hours on Wednesday, May 6, Matt Berthot, a Winfield High School vocal music teacher, and several of his students brought a little hope and joy to Kansans through their Virtual Voices choir performance.

“It’s a reminder of what’s to come (after the pandemic) – love, joyfulness, bliss,” said Berthot, who has spent 16 years teaching students at Winfield Unified School District 465. “That’s why we’re doing this.”



Berthot donned a dark tuxedo and took the stage at Winfield High School at 7 p.m. Wednesday. The spotlight was on him – but not for long. He introduced 27 of his best students who performed for people all over the nation – through Zoom and YouTube. There was a variety of music genres, and Berthot promised a good show. He has trained his students using the Estill Voice Model, which has taught students how to perform everything from country to opera.

About 150 of Berthot’s choir students auditioned by videotape to be in the Virtual Voices performance. They spent the past six weeks preparing – picking their song, learning about lighting and video. Then, it

was up to Berthot to select between 25 and 30 students for the performance.

“My students are used to the friendly competition,” Berthot said. “They understand that not everyone gets a part. We’ve had people playing the piano, ukulele, singing. We’re making it work. And they’re excited about it. That’s what is really cool.”

The teacher had to get clearance from Winfield USD 465 administrators to do the performance virtually.

“It’s exciting to know that we have the green light to do the show,” Berthot said. “This has been a definite team effort. I always tell my students to take a risk. The only way you can grow is by growing through change. I knew this (the pandemic) was going to be a big change in our world. Instead of looking at the pandemic as a super downer, I look at it as an opportunity to take a risk and grow.”

Berthot and the selected students had a dress rehearsal at 7 p.m. Monday, May 4. They worked with district administrators and members of the Information Technology team to ensure the concert ran smoothly.

“They have reached out to artists and technology contacts in their district and across the nation to get everything in order,” said Mike Pounds, an education program consultant for the Kansas State Department of Education. “They were even able to collaborate to an extent with artists like Ira Wolf and Jordan Butler. Another very interesting partner they have in this project is Winfield High School alum Chase Foster. Foster is the collaborating producer for the Jonas Brothers! He will be sitting in on their dress rehearsal on Monday to provide advice and feedback on their performance. It is so exciting to see our educators and students take this adversity head-on and overcome it in the most creative ways.”

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Also joining the dress rehearsal was Chia Mejia Lopez from Ecuador, who was Berthot's exchange student and is now a music professional, and Stevie Heptig, a Winfield High alum working as a music professional in New York City.

KC Crandall and Hunter Thompson, both 18-year-old choir students at Winfield High, said they learned a lot preparing for the concert. They also worked to create a trailer that was used to promote Virtual Voices through YouTube and other social media platforms. The students didn't just learn music, they learned about lighting, video work and marketing.

To watch the trailer for the performance, visit <https://youtu.be/FNTtzj8LSps>. The Virtual Voices concert can be accessed on Berthot's YouTube channel, <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCOX5pZk1ttyk2gHh8RA1QQ>.

Crandall spent about four to five hours per week preparing for the concert. Crandall and Thompson also said this was a good send-off for seniors. Although the choir won't be together, they are still a team, Crandall said. He compared it to baseball – while each player is performing a solo, he or she also is performing as part of a team. "It's been really hard for seniors," Crandall said. "When we left, we didn't know that we wouldn't see each other again. Now, we have one last opportunity to perform as a team."

The district purchased eight new microphones for students to use, Thompson said. "This feels professional," she said. "I'm excited."

Both seniors are proud to perform under the direction of Berthot.

"I would call him a fireball," Crandall said. "He's always there for us. Doing this – he's a trendsetter."

Thompson agreed.

"He has such a passion for his job," she said. "He has a way of thinking big picture. And he's very optimistic."

Berthot's optimism has helped him get through teaching during the pandemic. But he did go through a rough patch at the beginning of the stay-at-home order.

"In the six weeks that we've been in shelter, I had two days where I freaked out like everybody else," he said. "I was fearful, but only for two days, probably during the second week. But ever since then, I feel like I've gotten a lot stronger. My confidence is up. I think I manage my time better now. I hope the world understands how important teachers are face-to-face. This is going to be an awesome reset for everyone to reflect on. This is a giant wake-up call for everyone in the world."

When Berthot isn't preparing for the show, he is enjoying spending time with his wife, Andrea, who is a drama teacher, and their two sons, Max, 10, and Leo, 4.

"To be able to create right now is so refreshing," Berthot said of Virtual Voices. "This is a new opportunity to do something completely different. I think people will really appreciate the honesty and vulnerability that these kids perform with. I'm proud of the kids for being so resilient. The kids are hungry for this. They want to share hope, joy, and bliss with the world, and give people a little bit of encouragement."

The concert was performed on YouTube Live, but since then, there have been nearly 3,000 more views. "We for sure made the goal of sharing joy, love and hope," Berthot said. "Loads of emails and messages from all over have said how much of a blessing this was. We learned that we must lead from the front and not let fear dictate our actions. But hope and innovation [are] what matter right now. Huge risks equal great experiences. Obviously, all of us learned a ton about video, audio and preparation online. We are ready for the future."