

The Augusta Chronicle

Jessye Norman lends talent to benefit

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Stellar musical performances of all genres filled the halls of the Sacred Heart Cultural Center on Sunday afternoon.

The benefit concert for the Jessye Norman School of the Arts included selections by trombonist Wycliffe Gordon, pianist Damien Sneed, opera singer Laquita Mitchell, vocalist D.L. Barksdale, the Sounds Unlimited Band, Eleventh Hour and even Norman herself. The international opera star sang, played piano and led the crowd in the hymn Amazing Grace.

Designed to raise money for the arts school named in Norman's honor, the concert named Augusta's Greatest for Augusta's Youth drew a crowd of 450 people from the local area.

The event also featured a contemporary gospel medley by the Mount Calvary Children and Youth Choir, where Norman was a member during her childhood in Augusta.

The Rachel Longstreet Foundation, a 501(c)(3) organization, opened the Jessye Norman School of the Arts in 2003 as part of its mission to bring the arts to children who otherwise wouldn't be able to experience them.

Joshua Torran, a third-year student at the Jessye Norman School of the Arts, said the school "has been a great inspiration" in his life and has provided the opportunity to learn about drama, dance, vocals and the guitar.

"The Jessye Norman School of the Arts means more to me than just the arts. It has given me a chance to meet others who have the same interests as I do. When the Jessye Norman School of the Arts comes to mind, I think of a place of happiness where students like me can dream of a future career in the arts," Torran said.

Before her surprise performance on Sunday, Norman said the concert allowed a glimpse of "what can happen when the arts are a part of one's life."

"We're having the children to understand they have an inner voice," Norman said. "That there is something inside of them that they can share with us in the most positive way. And that becoming acquainted with the arts, whether it's through movement, drama, music, painting or writing, that they learn to speak with that voice and understand that we want to listen. That we are interested in what is going on inside of them."

Whether or not students at the school pursue professional arts careers, Norman hopes the school produces "fully developed human beings." She said the arts "changes lives."

"That is what the school is about. The school is about making wonderful, involved citizens of these marvelously talented children," Norman said.

Dr. Linda Scales, the vice president of the Rachel Longstreet Foundation board, said the funds raised will be used for the renovation project on the first floor of the building at 739 Greene Street. The project is scheduled to begin in September. The school needs to raise \$200,000.

“This will give us 8,000-square-feet of additional space. With that, we’ll have air conditioning and heat downstairs with restrooms downstairs,” Scales said.

Also this weekend, six students from Augusta Preparatory Day School produced the musical *You’re a Good Man, Charlie Brown*, and raised \$1,200 to benefit the Jessye Norman School of the Arts, she said.

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