

## THE LONG ISLAND CHILDREN'S CHOIR: HITTING ALL THE RIGHT NOTES

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**A new children's choir on Long Island, founded by local parents, strives to help fill the gap in children's arts education and give back to the community.**



The Long Island Children's Choir, including the Harmonia group of intermediate-level singers in fifth through 12th grade (pictured), performed earlier this year at Barnes & Noble in East Northport.

In recent years, spring has brought with it school budget cuts on Long Island, eliminating everything from AP classes to teachers' positions to extracurricular activities. Parents usually feel helpless in the face of cuts to programs their children care about. But last year, when Jennifer Shaer and Roger Lao learned that their daughter's music program was going to be affected, they decided to take action, creating the **Long Island Children's Choir**. Already, the choir is more than 100 voices strong, and it draws singers from Queens to Hampton Bays.

### Leading by Example

"Like other parents in the community, when faced with this budget crunch we attended the Board of Education discussions, but the outlook was grim," says Shaer, who lives in the Half Hollow Hills school district in Dix Hills. "We decided to take matters into our own hands while teaching our children an invaluable lesson. We wanted to show them that, when faced with a problem, they can choose to sit back and complain or they can be part of the solution."

But Shaer and Lao, both of whom are physicians, needed help. So they called on other parents in their district and Colleen Regan, 13-year-old Samantha Lao's choir director at West Hollow Middle School. Regan, who lives in Sayville, agreed to be the artistic director, though she says she expected only about 30 students. But so many children auditioned that the team had to create three separate choral groups, quickly exceeding Regan's five-year goal.

"The need for a program like this is so great that the turnout all over the island has been more than expected," says Christine Califano of Dix Hills, who runs LICC's day-to-day operations. Her 13-year-old daughter Haley and 11-year-old son Frankie are members. "My daughter sings 24 hours a day, so with this choir she is in her glory. For all of us parents who are running the program, this is a labor of love because so many kids benefit from it."

## Music for All

Auditions were held in June, and parents learned of the choir by word-of-mouth, social media, and the recommendations of some choral teachers across the island. When the LICC met in September to begin rehearsals, 108 first- through 12th-graders showed up. The choir is made up of Prelude, a preparatory ensemble for kids in first through fourth grade; Harmonia, the intermediate group for fifth- through 12th-graders, in which the singers get more music literacy training and are split into two to three voice parts; and Lyric, for advanced singers in seventh through 12th grade who learn to read music and sing four-part a cappella pieces. Regan says her new goal is to have an even greater range of choirs, "so we can have a place for everyone."



Eight-year-old Courtney Brecher of Dix Hills sings in the choir's Prelude group for students in first through fourth grades.

According to Shaer, the LICC is a nonprofit corporation with the goal of providing musical opportunities to children of all socioeconomic backgrounds. There is a membership fee to pay for expenses such as the choral director, artistic director, and accompanists. But those students who qualify for free or reduced lunch are eligible for scholarships. Shaer says the cost is the same as her son's T-ball fees, starting at \$225 per semester for the youngest group and topping out at \$275 for the select choir. The choirs currently rehearse one hour a week at Five Towns College in Dix Hills.

"We want to provide exposure to arts education for kids who are experiencing cutbacks in their schools," says Lao, the LICC's chief operating officer. "But we don't want to replace school choral programs. The Long Island Children's Choir is intended to supplement current music education programs. In fact, in order to audition, children

have to get recommendations from their school choral directors, unless the school doesn't have one."

## **A Choir for a Cause**

The LICC also has a broader mission.

Allison Brecher, a litigation attorney, serves as the choir's legal counsel. She says her 8-year-old daughter Courtney has gained self-confidence from being part of the choir.

"For me, musical theater was a large part of my experience growing up. I wouldn't be what I am today without it, so I am glad to be a part of making this experience for other children," says Brecher, who lives in Dix Hills. "But I also wanted us to have the community service component, so our kids can meet other kids and also do something for others—kind of like a choir for a cause."

That's why the two older groups have already performed for the Town of Huntington on Veterans Day, at a Stony Brook University football game, for the New York Islanders at Nassau Coliseum, and at a Barnes & Noble. They are also partnering with the Songs of Love Foundation in Forest Hills, which provides personalized songs for children and teens currently facing medical issues. Brecher says they are open to suggestions for other performance opportunities.

Half Hollow Hills didn't wind up cutting chorus all together last year—though they did eliminate the select after-school ensemble and the spring musical—but Shaer says a number of other districts did. "I hope that trend doesn't continue. Kids should get music, instruments, and chorus as part of their day. It shouldn't have to be extra," she says, adding that her daughters Samantha and 10-year-old Lindsay Lao are enjoying the LICC experience.

That sentiment seems to be shared by other LICC participants as well. Nina Alvarado drives her 12-year-old son Robert from Ronkonkoma to rehearsals each week. "He was recommended by his fifth-grade teacher last year, and we were so honored. Singing is his passion," Alvarado says. "And through LICC, not only has he met new friends, his singing voice has already gotten stronger. And I like that I have met a whole new group of moms, too."

For 14-year-old Destiny Galluccio of Massapequa Park, who also sings in her school's choir, the LICC is more than the experience to sing soprano outside of school. "I wanted to learn more beyond what I do in school, and to meet new friends. One of the best experiences was performing at the Islanders game. I had never done that before," she says. "I used to get nervous performing, but not anymore. I think other kids should join because it helps you to make a lot of new friends and you get to sing along the way."

And Ms. Regan is bubbly and funny, which makes it fun.”

The LICC held its inaugural concert on Jan. 26 and has plans for upcoming events and auditions. For information about how to audition or to learn more about the Long Island Children’s Choir, visit [lichildrenschoir.org](http://lichildrenschoir.org) or call 631-306-4121.

<http://www.nymetroparents.com/article/long-island-childrens-choir-hitting-all-the-right-notes>