

Hope 'at the hop'

Earth Angels show passion for '50s music, community spirit

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You're never too old to rock 'n' roll.

But thanks to the Earth Angels, you're never too young to learn about giving to others, either. The dancing, lip-synching non-profit group, made up of talented kids ages 9-17, travels around the state to do pro-bono performances at hospitals and nursing homes.

At the end of the shows at nursing homes," said Barbara Krasman, a Farmington Hills resident and mom of Earth Angel Danielle, 13, "they shake everybody's hands and thank them for being at the show. It gives them a sense of compassion."

Jan Lynn, another Earth Angels parent from Farmington Hills, noted how the group is "giving something back to the community, and it helps them realize how good they've got it."

Krasman, Lynn and other parents of group members and Earth Angels' founder and director Lisa Campos for emphasizing that particular aspect.

"Lisa's the angel in Earth Angels," said slick-back-haired parent David Berman.

Of course, the multi-talented kids from many area communities practice hard to perfect their nostalgic routines for quite a different reason — entertainment, which they do very well.

Evidence of such was the "Blat from the Past and Into the Millennium Sock Hop" May 15 at the William Costick Activities Center in Farmington Hills.

More than 300 attended the sock hop, the Earth Angels' largest annual fundraiser, essential to keep them traveling to those charity shows they perform.

Bringing back an era

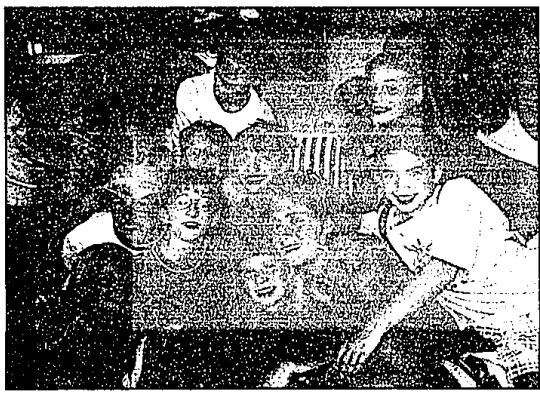
At the "Blat from the Past" sock hop, songs from a bygone era came back to life.

Monmouth, while with two sets of good time music, comedy and fun.

The Earth Angels were a hit with the audience — many dressed in cool '50s garb and sporting the American Graffiti attitude.

For example, girls and women came out wearing the outfits that made Laverne and Shirley popular, while some guys in the crowd harkened back to the past by tucking packs of cigarettes in the rolled-up sleeves of their T-shirts.

Dashing out before the event to buy a pack of Saloms for his T-shirt was Earth Angels parent Joe Lynn, but he made it clear



She started it: Surrounded by the current Earth Angels group is its director, Lisa Campos, who began the group in her own backyard.

they weren't for smoking. "I'm wearing white socks, though," said Joe, attending with wife Joan to watch 17-year-old son Patrick work the crowd.

David Berman probably was the coolest cat at the sock hop, wearing a wild, purple suit and shades. He and his wife, Susie, have two kids in the group, Evan and Jordan.

He wasn't eligible for the best-dressed contest, judged by Farmington Hills Mayor Aldo Vagnozzi and 47th District Court Judge Maria Parker, among others.

Winners were: age 10 and under, Jackie Efrusy, Nick Wasko; teens, Courtney Adams, Kaylin Connors; adult, Donna Mazzotti and Larry Hollinck.

Also appropriately dressed was the sock hall, with walls adorned with replicas of old record albums. There also were colorful balloons and cardboard cutouts of some of the stars of the 1950s and '60s.

Talent's no accident

"There's just something about '50s music," said one of the sock hoppers.

Apparently, the same could be said for the Earth Angels, started by accident in Campos' back yard 13 summers ago.

"We were putting on a little

show in our back yard (in Livonia) and charging a quarter for five songs," said Campos, between sets at the sock hop. "Obviously, it grew from there."

For that first show, they didn't even have a name for the group. But Campos settled on "Earth Angels," actually the name of the final song from that very first show.

Helping Earth Angels grow to 60 members today were several performances at the Livonia Spree, along with word-of-mouth praise. Even though the group is much bigger now, Campos said the philosophy hasn't changed since 1986.

"The kids don't earn a penny," Campos said, "because I want them to learn they can make others happy, and that they can be happy without making money."

They make others happy through their performances, which often include jumping off stage and running to the tables, as Chelsea Swanderski, 10, did during her lip-synching rendition of "Heat Wave."

"We just go out to some person

who looks like they'll get into it," laughed Chelsea, of Farmington Hills.

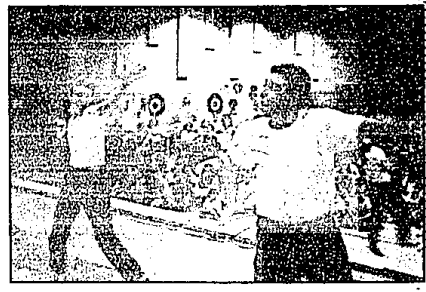
Chelsea, whose mom Michelle co-chaired the event with Bonnie Murphy, was among several Earth Angels who credits the experience for helping them learn a lot more than music.

At the top are self-discipline, confidence, poise, teamwork and respect for themselves and others. And with many practices and performances — such as at a May 21 ice cream social at High-meadow Common Campus — they carry personal planners with them.

"It's helped me in so many ways," said Livonia's Erin Martell, who left the group last summer after an eight-year stint. "I'm not afraid to go up to people, which will always help me."

Her brother Jeff doesn't lack self-confidence, either. He and Jordan Berman teamed up for a rousing "Blues Brothers" bit, as "Elwood" and "Jake," respectively.

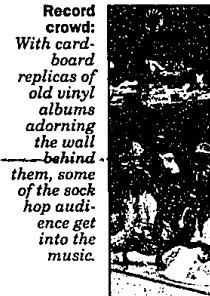
"I interact with people a lot better," Jeff said. "We do it in the performances and it helps me. And it's a big family."



Jake and Elwood — almost: Above, Jeff Martell (left) of Livonia and Jordan Berman of Farmington Hills shake their red sneakers all over the stage. A little while later, they donned dark suits, hats and sunglasses and performed as The Blues Brothers.



Talent scout: At left, Chelsea Swanderski of Farmington tries persuading an audience member to join her on stage for the rest of a song.



Record crowd: With cardboard replicas of old vinyl albums adorning the wall behind them, some of the sock hop audience get into the music.

She recounts how Earth Angels began

Following is a special, first-person account by Lisa Campos, founder and director of Earth Angels. She is a former Livonia resident.

While I was writing my letter to go into the kids scrapbook, I realized that I should share this story with the parents as well as the kids. With you by our side at every show, you too often catch a glimpse of the magic. I hope you enjoy!

When I started this group back in 1986, I was only 15 and began something I could only have dreamed about. I realized after our first backyard show, that something magical and special had happened out there. Our audience was smiling, laughing, cheering us on and having a great time. And we were the reason why! I decided right there and then that this was a valuable lesson to take with you in life. Since then, E.A. has performed at endless shows over the years and each time we leave, we leave a lasting impression on our audience. You never know how a kind handshake, a wink of the eye or touch of the hand will touch someone else's life. You are giving this special gift to the audience every time you perform. And the best part is that it is completely free! You don't need money to make others happy — it's the gift of yourself that you give. Before I get too carried away, let me share with you a special story that I hold dear to my heart.

A few years ago, we performed at a handicapped children's camp that was about an hour and a half away in a small rural town on a lake. Unfortunately that day, there was construction, which we got caught in. Furthermore, it was Friday and it seemed everyone was headed north for the weekend. Regardless, we didn't arrive until 8 p.m. when we were supposed to per-

GUEST COLUMN

form at 7 p.m.

Nevertheless, we finally got there, set up and got ready to do a full set. As we were waiting to go on, the counselors started to bring in the kids. Many were in wheelchairs, had walkers, crutches, braces or needed assistance walking. They crammed us into their biggest room, which was small in comparison to our practice areas. In spite of that, we ran through the set and got one of our best shows ever. We probably overdid the A.P., but these kids could not get enough. They loved being sung to and touched. When we took our last show bow, the kids cheered even louder.

As we were cleaning up, the camp director came in and gave us the money due for our performance. As he handed me the wad of bills, everyone grew quiet. When he walked out of the room, you could have heard a pin drop. Slowly and quietly, one member spoke up and mumbled if it was really right to accept the money. We looked around at each other and realized just how fortunate we were. Here we were walking, talking, laughing and just a little earlier, dancing. In comparison, as we looked outside the window, we saw the silhouettes of the many campers on the lawn. They seemed just like us, for the shadows cast aside the wheelchair and walkers that they so desperately relied on, for you, could just hear their laughter and excited chatter over the music that played in the background. One of the members asked the group if they would like to return the money. After a few quiet moments, I took a vote. Slowly arms started going up around the room. Speechless, I handed the money over to one of the captains and the entire

group followed him out in silent procession. I followed behind as we walked through the dark hall to the door that led out to where the campers were. As I watched the group one by one walk out the screen door up to the camp director, I was overcome with emotion. As tears ran down my face, I felt extreme compassion for the campers, pride in my great group and profound admiration for these E.A. members and so righteously put into action the idea behind Earth Angels.

As I carefully walked back down the dark hall, eyes filled with tears, a shiny object near the window somehow caught my eye. The reflection of the moonlight on that area in the dark hallway. I bent down to pick up what I thought was a lost costume piece and realized it wasn't what I first thought it to be. I walked closer to the window to see what it was. It was a small

See CAMPOS, A4

WHO'S WHO

- Director: Lisa Campos
- Members: Jordan Berman, Evan Berman, of Farmington Hills; Jessica Berner, of Westland; Michelle Butkovich, of Livonia; David Horyn, of Detroit; Danielle Krasman, of Farmington Hills; Kristen Kwiatkowski, of Livonia; Chris Liza, Katie Liza, of Farmington Hills; Patrick Lynn, of Farmington Hills; Jeffrey Martell, of Livonia; Cari Murphy, of Farmington Hills; Dana Nuccitelli, of Farmington Hills; Diana Saens, Carl Saenz, of Farmington Hills; Jeff Springer, of Farmington Hills; Joshua Stillman, of Farmington Hills; Chelsea Swanderski, of Farmington Hills; Drew Wright, of Livonia.

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