



Friends: Learning to work as a team means learning to understand each other and work with each other. The weeklong camp helped the Mercyaires build bonds that no doubt will last for years.

One tough week

Mercyaires give their all for the team, bonding and bonfires

BY TIM SMITH
STAFF WRITER

Who in their right mind would willingly plunk down good money to go to a summer camp where all you do is work your butt off for 10 hours a day?

The Mercyaires do. And they love what they pay for, namely, an intense, week-long experience where there's bonding and bonfires — not to mention some pretty awesome times.

"It pulls everyone together," said Stephanie Barlow of Wisom, one of the select group of 18 juniors and seniors from Farmington's Mercy High School who make up the Mercyaires. "Without the camp we wouldn't be as close knit. We wouldn't function as a group, which is essential to being Mercyaires."

Under the auspices of Mercyaires founder Larry Teevens, who recently retired after a 37-year career as Mercy High School's music director, the girls wake up and sing. Before breakfast, they dance before lunch. They enjoy each other's company the whole day.

"There's some adversity, getting up early and doing 10-hour days," said Teevens, who will continue his longtime role as Mercyaires director and lead two after-school rehearsals every week throughout the year. "They come together in hatred. Of me."

Teevens chuckled when he said that. It's obvious that the Mercyaires adore the 65-year-old Northville resident.

"He's like our grandfather," Barlow said.

Only one who amazingly keeps up with generation after generation of Mercyaires.

"This is his 38th year of doing Mercyaires," said Sarah Haley, of Waterford. "He's going to have a pretty good idea how to interact with people on our level."

Mercyaires mission

Of course, with 40 to 50 Mercyaires performances scheduled between September and June, there is a motivation for Teevens and the teens to perfect ballads, hip-hop numbers and even the old soft shoe before practice time

all but disappears. After all, the self-supporting group is expected to provide entertainment everywhere from country clubs to church basements.

And performing — putting smiles on people's faces — is "what the Mercyaires are all about," said Erin Johnson, of Farmington Hills. "It's just a really good message."

According to Stephanie, Erin and several other members of the performing group, spending seven days on the shores of Lake Huron, at a Catholic Youth Organization camp, gives the girls an important head start.

"I feel this is, to me, a mini-Broadway," said Katie Gara-giola, a Bloomfield Hills resident. "You can take dance lessons and you can take chore lessons. But there are very few groups where you just do this kind of dance, this kind of singing and do this many shows in high school."

"In this camp, we practice more than 10 hours a day and, overall, about 70 hours in the week. Which is more than we can do in three or four months during the school year."

Concurring was Erin Addison, of Beverly Hills. "If we didn't have this camp, we would not be knowing these dances, we wouldn't be able to perform as many numbers. Coming here, we learn everything. Then we go home and polish it."

It didn't hurt that New York City choreographer Alison Kolin-ski, a one-time member of the Bob Fosse Dancers, spent three days coaching the group and getting everybody into the groove. Nor that the Mercyaires already possessed considerable musical talent and dedication to the craft.

Kolin-ski said that their enthusiasm, and talent, makes her job that much more rewarding.

"With their abilities, I can tell this is going to be one of the great Mercyaires groups," Kolin-ski said. "And I'm thrilled, because I can give them more difficult stuff."

When they do the dances, they have so much energy. And they love them. That makes all the difference in their performance.

Let's get to work

The scenic CYO girls camp located north of Farmington provided the perfect setting as far as setting the tone



Do it again: Lori Michael, a Westland resident, practices and practices, and practices again.

for the months to come. To be a successful Mercyaire requires learning both the material and each other.

"It's away from home, no distractions," Teevens explained. "We don't have any conflicts. Nobody visits."

Aside from an occasional softball game or dip in the nearby lake, the teens have the luxury of devoting all their time and energy to the task at hand.

"Total devotion to the arts came through loud and clear during Monday morning's rehearsal of 'Joak Joint,' a rousing hip-hop number from a Quincy Jones album. During the introduction, clusters of dancers moved from four corners of the floor into the center, joining together as an entity."

Kolin-ski stood opposite the girls as they shuffled about the floor of the old church building, moving in rhythm to the music blasting from a portable stereo. An empty bench, between the choreographer and group, represented what would be the edge of the stage.

"This whole routine, they learned it since they've been here," noted Teevens, watching from the side. "We'll take this back to school and clean it up until it's letter perfect."

An indication of the group's versatility became evident when the next number began playing. The Mercyaires broke into a line dance of the Heba McIntyre song, "Why Haven't I Heard From You?"

"We try to do every kind of musical style possible," Teevens explained. "We do a barbe-

number, with the straw hat. We try any category and do them all."

Including the kind of chorale music that Teevens envisioned when he started the Mercyaires. A definite group staple is the hymn "Ave Maria," and they practiced one verse before taking a short break. Teevens said the song often is performed at weddings of Mercyaire alumni.

Learning from a pro

Before lunch, the group hurriedly changed into their purple Mercyaires sweatshirts and walked down to the beach for a photo shoot. They took advantage of the locale to do a medley of 1960s music.

On the way down to the water, Kopinski talked about why it is important for the girls to work with someone who works in a profession many of them want to pursue after high school.

"I'm a professional choreographer," said Kopinski, whose husband, Joe, is a performer who met Teevens while doing 1970s shows at Mercy High School. "It gives the girls a good sense of the professional world. I try to run the rehearsals to make them fun. But I also want them to understand the rigors of a rehearsal day."

Then, sneaking a glance at Teevens, she added that it gives me so much work that I have to keep on going, going and going."

According to Kopinski, the Mercyaires camp experience is important for several reasons. And not all of them have to do with singing and dancing.

The formation of lasting friendships is an obvious benefit. But high school juniors and seniors ride back to Farmington Hills with greatly enhanced self-confidence.

Another plus is the fact half the campers are juniors and the other half are seniors. The younger girls take the lead from those who have been Mercyaires already.

By the end of the week, every girl knows what is expected of them as a Mercyaire.

Several girls, following a quick lunch of tomato soup and grilled cheese sandwiches, talked about the Mercyaires camp and its impact on them.

When the camp began, Livonia's Kim Thompson doubted whether she'd be able to fit in, and do all the routines despite a handicap. She was born with spina bifida and wears metal braces around her ankles.

But then, she found out she was handling the routines just fine. Her self-doubt evaporated. Now, she can't wait for the first official performance of the year.

"Being in the Mercyaires, and learning to perform, is going to help me," said Thompson, enter-



Here we go again: After a week of dancing, running and walking, all to prepare for the upcoming season, the Mercyaires' feet needed a rest.

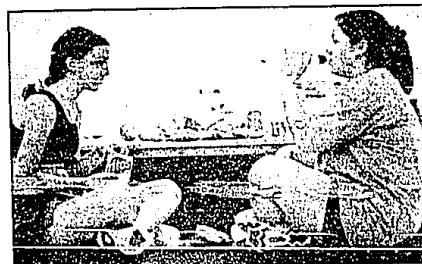
ing her junior year. "I'll be able to be in front of people and not be embarrassed about doing something different. And the dancing is helping me become more uninhibited about moving."

Westland resident Lori Michael, soon to be a senior, said learning each member's strengths and weaknesses is one benefit. But becoming proficient at a variety of musical styles

just helps you develop as a person."

Meanwhile, Barlow recalled how Teevens compared the Mercyaires to high school athletic teams.

"It's not like a sports team, where ... you have to lose sometimes," Barlow said. "We don't ever have to lose."



Quiet: A tough week it was. But there was also plenty of time for fun and companionship. Here Erin Addison and Meghan Lorenzon take a break.



On my count: Allison Sherve leads the group in a new dance routine.