

Optimist winners named

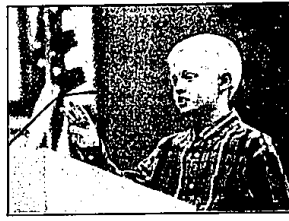
Eight young men stepped to the podium Wednesday morning to compete in the Farmington Hills Optimists' oratorical contest, held at the Farmington Training Center. Club President and Farmington Director of Public Safety Gary Goss and Diane Bauman, communications coordinator for Farmington Public Schools, presided over the event. Taking the top three spots were David Myers, Gold Medal, Matthew Shur, Silver Medal and Nick Cassell, Bronze Medal. The winners in the boys' and girls' competition, held last week, will go on to a regional event held in Clarkston Middle School on April 13.



David Myers



Matthew Shur



Nick Cassell

STAFF PHOTO BY BILL BIESLER

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AAA needs canned food donations

Here's a chance for Oakland County residents to clean some clutter from their kitchens and help those in need.

AAA Michigan is hosting a "spring canned food drive," with donations going to benefit Gleaners' Community Food Bank.

The drive will take place March 18-28. AAA Michigan employees, members and the general public are asked to donate cans, jars and boxes of non-perishable food items, such as cereal, pasta, soups, canned vegetables, canned fruits or canned meats.

Donations can be dropped off at any AAA Michigan full-service branch. In Farmington Hills donations may be left at 38751 W. 12 Mile Road.

For more information, call 248-553-3337

Music from page A1

McMullen was raised on the band's collection of songs, many of which are two and three centuries old. She started playing them when he learned to play drums as a teenager.

"Everyone over there knew these songs," McMullen said. In 1978, McMullen and his wife, Sandra, left Ireland and moved to her native metro Detroit. He occasionally performed Irish songs until a steady

An acquaintance called McMullen, looking for an Irish band to perform at The Old Shiloh in Detroit. McMullen assembled a trio to play Irish tunes and Blackthorn was born. Since that time, a steady schedule of pub and small concert performances built a following which included people that would later join the band.

Klein started play for Blackthorn in 1986 when the band wanted to add keyboards to the band's then-all-string harmonies.

In 1988, guitarist Gary McMullen, then performing for another band that shared venues with Blackthorn, replaced an original member. Bassist Dennis Green, McMullen's former mate in another band, did the same in 1993.

Since then, the quartet has combined their extensive musical backgrounds in folk, bluegrass, rock and country to form today's Blackthorn sound.

"They're all very good," McMullen said. "Their vocals and harmony are great. This current configuration is the best."

This foursome, who are between 38 and 56 years old, plays 70 shows a year and sells several CDs with live and studio songs. The group balances time with the band and their full-time jobs and families.

"Our families are very supportive," Green said. "They love the band. Our kids will come with us sometimes and sell CDs for us."

Beat goes on

Despite their attempts to bring fresh songs to their shows, audiences demand they continue to play staple songs, such as *Tonight's the Night for Drinking* and *Hey Wife*.

"We can't touch at least one-third of the songs in our reper-

■ This foursome, who are between 38 and 55 years old, plays 70 shows a year and sells several CDs with live and studio songs.

toire or we'll catch hell because we'd abandon the others," McMullen said.

Audiences want to hear these catchy Irish tunes over and over again, Gary McMullen said, because they are hard to find.

"We're different, unique and offer a refreshing change to what we get on the radio," McMullen said. "Where else can you hear the banjo and accordion together?"

While many Blackthorn songs may be the same, they do carry a range of emotions. The happy-go-lucky songs tend to get the whole audience involved.

"The way they get the crowd into the music is great," said Farmington Hills resident Aaron Brunko, who added he sees the band perform at least a half-dozen times a year. "You want to go out and buy their CDs because the music is so catchy."

"Also, it's a great band to have a Guinness with."

Then there's the other extreme. Last month, the family of recently slain Detroit Police Officer Michael Scanlan asked Blackthorn to perform *Oh Danny Boy* in remembrance. Band members said the emotions were so strong, it was difficult to finish the song.

"I've never performed that song for something like that," McMullen said. "That was something else."

In the end, Blackthorn is a group of ordinary guys who are enjoying opportunities to entertain crowds with their celtic sounds.

Any they said they don't see any end in sight.

Blackthorn has two Oakland County performances this week.

Today, from noon and 4 p.m., the band performs at Cowley's Old Village Inn, Farmington. Friday, starting at 8 p.m., the band plays at the Highland Lakes Campus of Oakland Community College, Waterford.

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