


World Choir Games

Games bring cousins together for first time



Shira Knopp, left, of Israel and a member of the Israeli Ankor Choir, stands with her cousin, Austin Merlin-Stetson, right, a student at the School for Creative and Performing Arts, and Austin's mother, Naomi Merlin, at the Mayerson Foundation. The two teens, who are worlds apart, met for the first time during the World Choir Games. THE ENQUIRER/AMANDA DAVIDSON

Family helps Israeli feel 'not that far from home'

By Janelle Gelfand
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Shira Knopp's choir, the Ankor Choir of Israel, has sung for American presidents, popes and international heads of state. But nothing has been more exciting for the 14-year-old Jerusalem resident than discovering she has a cousin in Cincinnati.

Two cousins who live worlds apart – Shira and Austin Merlin-Stetson, 17, of Deer Park – have been getting to know each other for the first time during Cincinnati's World Choir Games.

"I heard we were going to this thing in America called the World Choir Games. A bit later, we heard it's in Cincinnati, and my mom was like, 'Oh my God, we have family there,'" said Shira this week between performances of her choir.

They immediately sent a Facebook message to her mom's cousin in Cincinnati, Naomi Merlin.

Merlin had not seen any of her Israeli cousins since 1996, and she had

ANKOR CHOIR OF ISRAEL

The Israeli choir was sponsored by the Jewish Foundation of Cincinnati. Consisting of young women ages 13 to 18 of the Jerusalem Academy of Music and Dance, it is the house choir for Yad Vashem, Israel's Holocaust Memorial Museum.

The choir performs when international dignitaries visit the memorial. In recent years, it has sung for Presidents Clinton and Bush, American secretaries of state, Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI, among many others.

never met their children.

As it turned out, her son Austin, a student at the School for Creative and Performing Arts, was also competing with SCPA's Meridian 8 in the Choir Games.

Neither thought they would ever find each other amid thousands of choristers from all over the world.

On July 4, as Austin entered Great American Ball Park to line up with other SCPA students for the Opening Ceremony parade into U.S. Bank Arena, he overheard other students talking about the choir from Israel.

"They were right behind us," he said. "I started calling 'Shira!' Her jaw dropped. Neither of us knew what to say. It was just an unbelievable experience."

His mom had almost stayed home that day because of the 100-degree heat but decided at the last minute to go to U.S. Bank Arena and buy a ticket to the Opening Ceremony.

"The parade was already going, and the minute I got in line, here comes Israel," she said. "I started screaming Shira's name, and she said, 'Are you Naomi?' I mean, it sent shivers through my body."

Since meeting, they have had precious little time for visiting. During the Games, the Ankor Choir won silver and gold medals and have kept busy with other concerts, including a filled-to-capacity Friendship Concert at the Mayerson Jewish Community Center on Monday.

Before she visited Cincinnati, Shira had only seen photos of her American cousins. To meet Austin for the first time "felt really special," she said.

"It felt really fun to have family here, and to know I'm not that far from home."

NOTEBOOK

Local choirs score awards

Last week, the World Choir Games awarded 56 gold medals, 66 silver and 9 bronze in the Champions Competition. In the Open Competition, the Games awarded 29 gold diplomas, 54 silver and 17 bronze.

So far, the USA has medaled 36 times. China is second, with 15 medals.

Among the medalists in the first week of competition, Cincinnati Children's Choir under director Robyn Lana won a gold medal in the Youth Choirs of Equal Voices. The Children's Choir is an ensemble-in-residence at the University of Cincinnati's College-Conservatory of Music.

The Winton Woods High School Varsity Ensemble, led by David Bell, won gold in the Mixed Youth Chorus Champions Competition. "I've been to national competitions, where I know a silver medal is quite an honor. But to have gold at an international competition is an amazing compliment," Bell said.

Two ensembles from the School for Creative & Performing Arts (SCPA) swept the gold in the Open Competition at the Choir Games. Both the SCPA Chorale, directed by Laurie Wyant-Zenni, and Meridian 8, led by Rick Hand, won their respective gold diplomas, the highest honor in the Open Competition.

When Meridian 8 competed in the Mayerson Theater at SCPA, an overflow audience stretched down the hallways and nearly 700 people had to be turned away.

Said Wyant-Zenni about her SCPA Chorale, "There were many outstanding choirs that day, but SCPA sang as one voice and with one goal – to share their joy with the audience."

Both were the only American groups to score the highest number of points in their categories. The feat makes them eligible to compete in the next World Choir Games in the more competitive Champions Competition level.

– Janelle Gelfand

Some event tickets still available

Tickets remain for the following events:

» One-day passes for competitions today and Friday (\$15).

» Awards Ceremony, Friday, 7:30 p.m., U.S. Bank Arena (\$15-\$20).

» Awards Ceremony, Saturday, 10 a.m., U.S. Bank Arena (\$15-\$20).

» Gospel & Spiritual Celebration Concert, Thursday, 7:30 p.m., Music Hall (\$20-\$28).

» Closing Ceremony, Saturday, 7:30 p.m., U.S. Bank Arena. (\$20-\$50)

Call 513-977-6363 or go to www.2012worldchoir-games.com.



Rosalyn Liou and Noah Silverman, both 14, of the Sycamore Junior High School choir, show off some of the pins they've gathered from trading with other choirs these past few days during the World Choir Games. Pin trading expert David Hyman says it's about "exchanging, communicating and making friends." THE ENQUIRER/AMANDA DAVIDSON

Tip of the day: Pin trading

By Sarah E. Bailey
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Cincinnatians and contestants can participate in this language barrier-breaking game of purchasing lapel pins and trading them with people from around the world.

All I had to do was take my pin to the trading booth at the Duke Energy Convention Center, where I was enthusiastically greeted by pin-trading expert David Hyman.

Hyman told me and a small group of participants and Cincinnatians how to trade.

Language doesn't matter. Just go up to someone, see if you have a pin the other person wants, and make a fair trade.

In most circumstances, one pin is traded for one pin. There are some circumstances in which one rare pin may be equal to 10 common pins. It's a bargaining game for people who want to get or have these pins, Hyman said.

I pulled out my standard 2012 World Choir Games pin in hopes of trading it for a more colorful and exciting one.

I picked up a multi-colored game contestant-shaped pin. Hyman handed me a free pin in the shape of the number one

PIN TRADING TIPS

» Buy pins from \$6 to \$8 at the Duke Energy Convention Center super store and other venues of the World Choir Games.

» Take your pins to a free pin trading event or wherever you run into other pin holders, including concert venues, hotel lobbies, restaurants and Fountain Square.

» Find pins you want and swap yours out while meeting people from around the world.

» Take your souvenirs home with you as a memento of the 2012 World Choir Games.

PIN TRADING SPECIAL EVENTS

» Today: 10 a.m. and 2 p.m., Duke Energy Convention Center
» Thursday & Friday: 11 a.m. Fountain Square

which says "My First Pin," explaining that many participants and young children are even given this starter pin for free by the sponsors of the Games.

"There's no monetary value to this. We are exchanging, communicating and making friends," Hyman said.

He said pin trading has led to participants and guests exchanging contact information for email and Facebook so they can stay in touch after the Games.

That's just what Rosalyn Liou and Noah Silverman, both 14, from Sycamore Junior High School choir are doing.

"Getting things from foreign countries is my favorite

part of this," Liou said.

Liou showed off her Sycamore logo hat to me, which had 14 pins she has collected as a part of the pin trading experience this year.

She has already connected and made friends with people from Australia and Croatia as a result of trading pins and exchanging contact information.

Ceci Donovan, 13, of Cincinnati, said she is going to continue to add to her collection of three pins throughout the rest of the week.

"My goal is to get 10 or 15 total," Donovan said. "You can get these pins from around the world that you couldn't normally."