

Do you have what it takes to be a Singing Angel?

During this Christmas season of angels delivering messages of great importance, perhaps it is appropriate that Cleveland's own corps of young ambassadors is gearing up for a search for new angels of their own.

Cleveland's vaunted Singing Angels will be holding auditions from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. on Jan. 8 for girls 8 to 14 and boys 8 to 16 at the Masonic Auditorium building, 3615 Euclid Ave., Cleveland.

Prospects should come prepared to sing a song without accompaniment, but no appointment is necessary.

The Singing Angels were formed 40 years ago as a nonprofit organization conceived to give kids a chance to grown in an environment that just so happened to be a musical one.

According to the group's mission statement, the goal of the Singing Angels is "to encourage, foster and cultivate positive youth development by engaging youth from all communities in quality music and performing arts education that teaches discipline, builds confidence, and provides a foundation for life . . . making music, making friends, making a difference."

Along the way, the group has become an area institution.

The Singing Angels have toured the world, visiting more than 29 countries on three continents.

Last year, the Angels toured England and France. Hollywood was treated to the Angels in 2003.

Command performances have also included four trips to the White House, the Great Hall of the People in China and



Steve Couch

Young Thespians

two performances for Pope John Paul II at the Vatican.

A trip to Vancouver is planned for 2005.

The Angels have performed with numerous stars in music and entertainment over the years as well, including Bob Hope, Wayne Newton, Kenny

Rogers, Peabo Bryson, Roberta Flack, Audrey Hepburn, Celine Dion and Nancy Sinatra.

The Angels require guts, however, to go along with the glory. They spend up to 320 hours a year in training and give over 90 concerts annually.

Despite the grueling regimen, more than 350 students ages 8 to 18 take up the challenge each year, representing up to 70 Cleveland area communities from six different counties.

Lake County is well represented, with 23 Angels hailing from Mentor, Chesterland, Concord, Chardon, Eastlake, Painesville, Kirtland, Willowick, Willoughby, Willoughby Hills and Willowick.

Community outreach is a big part of what the Singing Angels are all about, and they participate in numerous civic activities to improve the quality of life in the Cleveland area.

The troupe regularly performs in concerts for the Fairfax Development Corp., which recognizes inner-city neighbor-

hood development, and Rally for Kids, raising awareness of Cleveland Public Schools.

The Angels were also featured at the opening ceremonies of the Special Olympics Winter Games and the National Wheelchair Veterans Games.

A lot of what the Angels do in their own community comes from many of the individual Angels' own ideas.

The group performed at the Cleveland Clinic Children's Hospital for Rehabilitation, and participated in Fresh Air Camp, a program for children with disabilities.

Penny Wars, a competition among the Angels, was initiated by one of the members to raise funds for a child with cancer whose family had no health insurance.

The Angels' youth outreach also includes sharing the gift of song with other community groups, such as Big Brothers/Big Sisters and the Berea Children's Home by providing concert tickets to their major shows.

The group's community outreach often includes many charitable donation campaigns, including a food drive for Harvest for Hunger, and benefit concerts for such organizations as the Salvation Army and St. Malachi's Hunger Center.

The Angels responded to the 9/11 tragedy by holding a one-week coin collection drive that raised \$5,000 for the Red Cross Relief Fund.

To sum it up, let's just say that Cleveland's Singing Angels are aptly named.

Jessica Wright is a 17-year old North High School student who is just one of the many Lake County Angels. She is

enjoying her fifth year in the group after auditioning as a 12-year old, just like many other area kids will be doing next week.

"My grandma saw an ad in the paper," Jessica said about the decision to audition. "She knew I was good at singing and enjoyed it. I wasn't sure I'd get in, but I hoped I could do it because it sounded really interesting."

Jessica was no slouch when it came to singing, having appeared in five years of summer camp productions at the Fine Arts Association in Willoughby. Her credits there included performances in "Leader of the Pack," "Schoolhouse Rock Live" and "Charlie and the Chocolate Factory."

But despite those productions and singing in her middle school choir, Jessica felt nothing had prepared her for life as a Singing Angel.

"When I learned I got in I was so excited," Jessica said. "I didn't know very much about the group before I auditioned. But being a member now makes me feel special and important to be a part of something that a lot of people know of and have heard about."

During Jessica's career as a Singing Angel, some of the highlights include backing up Nancy Sinatra in California and singing for military personnel at the Pentagon in the summer of 2002 as 9/11 rebuilding efforts were wrapping up.

"That was so inspiring," Jessica said of the Washington, D.C. trip.

"The military officers said they really enjoyed it and said it helped lighten their

mood."

As far as Jessica is concerned, that feeling is mutual.

She'll be graduating.

"It's kind of sad," Jessica said. "I don't want to see it go. It's so awesome, especially at a young age, to be a part of this group. I mean, how many kids get to do all of these things? It teaches you discipline and how to respect people, and it really helps you grow up as a kid. It also keeps you out of trouble because kids are busy in rehearsals. It's a lot of work, but it's worth it."

The Singing Angels encourage any interested auditioners to come on out and try. The group is dedicated to teaching music, so you don't necessarily even have to be the greatest singer to start.

Just bring a smile, a positive attitude and a willingness to work and learn. And no "American Idol" judges will be present, either.

"No matter what, you can't be 'not good enough' to be a Singing Angel," Jessica said.

"You will grow a lot and you will develop the talent you need. Just smile. You will get out of it what you put in."

Check out www.singingangels.org or call general manager Will Reichard at (216) 432-555, Ext. 13 for additional information.



Young Thespians is a column focusing on youth theater. If you have a story idea or a theater listing, e-mail Steve Couch at couch@ncweb.com.