

**Kristen Langlais**

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Newark Street School

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Testimony:

I would like to express my immense gratitude to the Newark Street School After School Program for the experiences my two daughters gained in the past 7 yrs there. This small, but important program allowed my girls to be part of the most unique, nurturing, and beneficial opportunity - to sing with the Newark Balkan Chorus. This chorus was formed about 20 yrs ago by the late Evanne Weirich and is now directed by her former students, sisters Elly Barksdale and Erin McKinnon. When Evanne was alive, I'm sure she had no idea what impact her chorus would have on all the children who've been part of this experience. It's one thing to learn to sing in a chorus, but it's an amazing experience to sing in a chorus without any English words! Elly and Erin teach these kids how to sing in many Balkan languages and the songs, harmonies, and rhythms of this music are very complicated. Not only have my girls learned to sing in other languages, they've had the chance to gain self-confidence from the countless performances of this chorus, from the halls of our local hospital to the stage of Fuller Hall at St Johnsbury Academy. They've entertained audiences at Young Tradition Vermont's Showcase in Burlington and at St Johnsbury's First Night. The reach of this little chorus has been surprisingly far. The haunting melodies of these traditional songs have no doubt elicited both goosebumps and tears from many audience members.

I want to say just another word about my oldest daughter who joined the chorus when she was in second grade and is now a freshman, singing in the Academy's chorus. When she was a new Balkan Chorus member, she could barely read and her low muscle tone required her to receive physical therapy weekly. She certainly had no idea where Croatia was on a map but she could sing Croatian songs. For a little girl who felt behind in the classroom and on the playground, she may have succumbed to low self-esteem. However, the opportunity to be part of such a special group of singers, with such amazing chorus teachers, changed that potential trajectory: singing is now her life and she is confident in her abilities. Her Balkan Chorus experience has led to her being accepted into "Districts" as an 8th grader and again this year as a high schooler. She participated in Village Harmony's Residential Camp last summer which involved singing Balkan music all day long for 10 days with a host of other teens from around the country. This summer she'll again take part in Village Harmony's 3 week Traveling Camp, which will reach audiences as far south as Rhode Island and as far north as our beloved Newark VT. My daughter picks up foreign languages easily because of this chorus and is currently excelling in her accelerated French class. Feeling successful in French & Chorus helps alleviate the struggle she continues to feel in PE class! For a career, she's considering speech language pathology - perhaps because she wants to help children who are delayed like her and perhaps because she simply wants to help them sing and enjoy language!

Thank you for listening to my testimony. I hope that I adequately conveyed the gratitude I feel when I think of the beautiful role the Newark Balkan Chorus has played in my daughters' lives. I can't imagine what their childhoods would've been like without this amazing after school opportunity!

Thank you very much,

Kristen Langlais