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NEWS RELEASE

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DO RE MI MEETS INDIAN CULTURE AT FORT PECK

MISSOULA --

Every third summer, Missoula hosts the International Choral Festival, attracting singing groups and fans from around the world. The festival also features some U.S. and Montana choruses, so it would be appropriate that American Indian tribes be represented. Thus far, however, they haven't been.

Two University of Montana faculty members have set out to change that for this summer's festival, July 12-16.

It all began fall semester 1998 when philosophy Professor Dick Walton attended the All-State Music Festival to see and hear his daughter perform with the All-State Orchestra. As he read the program, he noted the total absence of students from Montana's Indian reservations.

Walton graduated from Harlem High School -- which serves the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation -- where his father, Earl Walton, was the band and chorus teacher. In those days, a group of six or so Harlem High School musicians, tribal members and nonmembers -- including young Walton on tuba -- went to the All-State Music Festival every year.

That this no longer was the case began to churn away in Walton's head, and a few days later he was on the phone to Gary Funk, a UM associate professor of music. Walton proposed

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starting a summer vocal music camp at UM for tribal youth. The idea ignited Funk, a passionate musician and UM's choral director for the past five years.

Since neither he nor Walton knew quite how to pull off their ambitious plan, Walton says, they spent hours brainstorming. They called people on the reservations and at tribal colleges. Responses weren't promising.

With their eyes opened a bit to the challenges ahead, he and Funk trimmed their plans, backing off the summer-camp idea temporarily, settling instead on preparing an Indian choir to sing at the International Choral Festival. They also jettisoned their original "naive" plan to involve participants from all the tribes, Walton says.

"The distances are too great," he says. "We realized we could do a better job with one or two tribes."

Because they'd decided the only way to open the doors into tribal culture was to go where they had contacts, they chose the Fort Belknap and Fort Peck reservations. Walton had old friends at Fort Belknap. But more recently he'd had Horace Pipe, a tribal geologist at Fort Peck, as a philosophy student, and Walton remembered him as "a fine singer." Pipe perked his ears at the proposed project and arranged to get it on the Tribal Council agenda. Soon after, Walton and Funk made their first of three weekenders -- 1,000-mile round trips by car from Missoula to Wolf Point -- to make their pitch.

"We made a good presentation," Funk says. "One woman had tears in her eyes because she was so moved that we wanted to do this."

But the trips, more than just long, tiring drives, have been an emotional roller-coaster ride, sending the twosome from the doldrums to the stratosphere and back several times. Culture

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shock was unsettling, and the learning curve was steep. They were introduced to the importance of hand shaking, of cloth and tobacco in certain rituals, of memorial feasts and more. They also learned about what tribal members jokingly call "Indian time," which operates somewhat independently of the clock.

On the evening of their first visit to Fort Peck, Walton and Funk heard the Dakota Choir of about 12 women, and Funk conducted them in a few songs. Despite the fact that the choir didn't read music, it was a good rehearsal, he says. In fact, the members got so excited that about 9:30 p.m. one asked if he and Walton would like to hear "a drum," which Walton explains is not just a drum but also the drummers and the songs they sing and play. The experience overwhelmed them.

"We listened from 10:30 to midnight," Funk says. "It was a thrilling experience ... a powerful experience. And we felt we were a little bit accepted."

Still flying high the next day, they returned to Missoula and soon after had rounded up support from UM President George Dennison, the School of Fine Arts, College of Arts and Sciences Dean Jim Flightner and Lloyd Chesnut, vice president for research. They scheduled their second trip to Wolf Point.

When they arrived at the agreed time, only a handful of people had gathered for the meeting and rehearsal.

"This deflated our helium balloon," Funk says, "so we had a discussion. We told them we could not have a choir with six people. We needed 25 to 30." The six singers promptly went out and rounded up 16 more people -- anyone they could find -- and the group rehearsed. Another invitation to hear a drum, a different group this time, followed the rehearsal. When Walton and

Funk returned to their hotel at midnight, Funk had a call.

“They wanted a meeting at 8 a.m. the next morning (Sunday),” he says. “So we had a meeting, and we told them, ‘Here’s what needs to happen. This has to come from your soul. It has to become your idea because I’m going to be gone for three months.’ They agreed to get it organized, get a choir together, select music and rehearse.”

Relieved and excited, the twosome talked nonstop about outcomes all the way back to Missoula, Funk says.

“They have to do well,” he says. “We want to provide support for them to sing their music in their own way. The project is so full of hope and uplift if we can just get it to go.”

Between that weekend in February and the next one Walton and Funk arranged in March - - just before Funk took a class of UM music students to study for three months in Europe -- the group made great progress, Walton says. Calling themselves the Fort Peck Oyate Singers, they rehearsed every week with one of two local conductors: the Wolf Point high School choral director, Doug Trost, and Lynn Munson, the choral director at the tribal college and grade school. Still, the singers “have a long way to go,” Walton says.

“They’d never heard of the International Choral Festival,” he says. “In fact, choral music in the usual forms is alien to their culture. They sing, but they sing in unison. They don’t employ the same scale system, and they do different things with their voices than we do.”

With Funk in Europe until May, Walton is working to raise money from various community agencies to sustain the momentum of the project, which now includes some Fort Belknap singers. Funk is banking on the group’s having learned the music by the time he gets back. The plan is for the singers and a drum to perform at the festival.

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It will be a "stunning program" if they pull it off, Walton says, adding, "and I believe they will."

He and Funk hope eventually to broaden the project, bringing the tribal culture to campus. They share an admiration for values that tribes are working to preserve, such as respect for their elderly, value of family, importance of ceremony and sense of tradition.

"Americans tend to think of this learning as going one way -- that we'll teach the Indians about our culture," Walton says. "I happen to believe that we have a lot to learn from them."

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