

Choir director, Steve Kalke, started the Newcomer Choir at McMeans Junior High to help engage international and new students



“I can’t think of a time that I didn’t want to be in a classroom helping people discover the beauty of music.”

- Steve Kalke

Kalke’s *Chorus*

McMeans Junior High choir director, Steve Kalke, adds a love of music and lifelong lessons to students’ repertoire

Written by Kennan Buckner | Select photography by Reinaldo Medina

A piano player by the age of 5, McMeans Junior High (MMJH) choir director, Steve Kalke, loved music and school so much he decided to make both a career. “I can’t remember when I didn’t want to be a teacher,” he says. As a teenager, with a need for gas money and car insurance to pay, he taught private music lessons. He was recently awarded the MMJH Lifetime Achievement Award by the PTA. “He is a delight to have on my campus,” Principal Susan Rice says. “I love his enthusiasm, passion, and commitment.”

With decades of musical experience, Kalke takes his classes seriously, but makes sure students enjoy it, too. Parent

Naomi Hayes says, “While making music is a wonderful benefit to his job, it is evident his true calling is to make certain that each student has a song in their heart first.”

Caring About Students

Kalke works hard to create a family environment in the classroom. Eighth-grade student Jillian Marty says, “We are not just a choir class, we are a family.” Not only does he make music both fun and challenging, he keeps in mind the everyday pressures junior high students face. Seventh-grader Melissa Hayes says, “If anyone is stressed, Mr. Kalke takes a minute to talk about it before we get back to singing. We all know our problems are important to him.”

Welcoming Newcomers

MMJH is one of three Katy ISD junior high schools participating in the district's Newcomer program. It offers one year of immersive lessons for first-year recent immigrant students who are non-English speakers. Kalke's Newcomer class includes 54 students who speak 10 different languages.

The learning goes both ways for Kalke. "I learned that kids are kids no matter where they come from," he shares. "They all like to tease, have bad days, and learn to push through the tough times to make the best of a rough situation. They are amazing." One of the Newcomer choir's first performances was singing "God Bless America" during the Veteran's Day program on campus. "It was the most moving rendition I have ever heard," Rice says. "It brought tears to my eyes, and I'm so proud to have these students learning to sing under Mr. Kalke's direction."

Lifelong Lessons

As students' understanding of music increases, they build self-confidence with each performance. "Singing is such a personal thing, by that I mean there's no instrument to get in the way since you are the instrument. It takes a huge amount of self-confidence to sing well," Kalke says.

Parent Jeannie Griffith's seventh-grade son Thomas has cerebral palsy and uses an electric wheelchair. "The transition to middle school was filled with anxiety for our family," says Griffith. "All of that changed when we were introduced to Mr. Kalke."

Kalke met with the Griffith family before the school year began and assessed Thomas' abilities. He made it clear his

expectations for Thomas would be no different from any other choir member. One day after school, Thomas shared that Kalke had been "hard" on him. Jeannie says, "When I asked if he had done something to make Mr. Kalke angry, Thomas responded, 'No, Mr. Kalke doesn't get angry. He just wants me to want better for myself.'"

Whether it's sight singing or ear training, building confidence or welcoming new students, Kalke's kids learn skills helpful to all aspects of life. "I want my students to know I am teaching them a lifelong skill. Singing will always be a part of them," Kalke says. "I'm taking the long view as an educator. While they are with me for only 50 minutes a day, what they learn here can stay with them forever." **KM**

More About Mr. Kalke

- ★ He and his wife Angela have three children Allyson (24), Alex (21), and Capri (18)
- ★ A graduate of Dixie College, Southern Utah University, University of Houston, and Lamar University
- ★ Voice coach for pop duo MKTO's Tony Oller and has been since Oller was in the fifth grade
- ★ Pianist for the choir at his church, White Oak Ward at the LDS church



Kalke expects the best from all of his students



Kalke works to make every student feel special