

Saxons win choir championship for retiring director

B. Scott Anderson

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NEWBERG In her last time taking the stage, South Salem High School choir director Carol Stenson was sent out a winner.

After the past 12 years as the school's choir director and 21 years as a Salem-Keizer School District employee, Stenson will retire at the end of the year. On Saturday at the Class 6A State Choir Championships at George Fox University, the Saxons claimed the title for her.

"This whole year has had this special quality where it feels like we're on some sort of path to lead her exactly where she needed to be in her last year of teaching," said

South Salem senior Emily Boring.

When it was announced that South Salem had won, Stenson was in tears.

"I'm so proud because the kids showed such great love for me that it was important to them," she said. "I appreciate that they felt that way, but I don't lose sight of the fact that they're just great really talented and hard-working kids. They're also extremely motivated."

This was the second state title Stenson has won as South Salem's choir director and perhaps the most memorable.

"I thought it was one of our best state performances ever," she said. "I felt like the kids really brought it. The heart and the technique were there so, it was a perfect storm if I can use that analogy."

Saturday's championship was the South Salem's 11th state choir title and second under Stenson, the last coming in 2010. The other championships came under the tutelage of Loren Wenz, who retired from high school teaching in the early 2000s. Serving as a teacher at nearby Leslie Middle School, Stenson would consult with Wenz routinely about the finer points of choir before she took over the high school's choir program. On Saturday, Wenz, now a faculty member in the music department at George Fox University, served as the announcer for the championships. That connection made Saturday even more special for Stenson.

"He was just a great mentor for me," Stenson said. "He left me with such a great program that it was a joy —albeit scary sometimes — to take over for him."

Now, though, Stenson will step down with two state championships.

"It's very bittersweet," she said. "I love my job, but it's time for me."

More important than the championships, though, are the number of students whose lives have been impacted touched by Stenson. After the Saxons, who finished second

at state last year, claimed their state championship trophy and walked off the stage at Bauman Auditorium, she was inundated by students who hugged her and wanted their pictures taken with her.

"These are amazing students and I'm just blessed to have taught them," Stenson said. "I don't think people really understand what remarkable people they really are and that they're not just musicians. There's a depth of character, knowledge and talent there."

Among the top-5 at the championship, Sprague shared second place with Canby.

"It went great," said Sprague choir director David Brown. "With these choirs in Salem-Keizer, you have days that are good and you have days that are great. This was a great day. Everything worked really well and the kids felt what they were singing and all felt it together. That's key. We feel really good about our performance."

West Salem, last year's state champion, placed fourth. Also notable was McKay, which finished 10th in the 24-team competition. Stanford Scriven, the school's second-year choir director, has revitalized the choir program. Until Saturday, McKay hadn't competed in the state championships in seven years, prompting Scriven to say McKay's goal all year was simply to compete at state. Anything else was a bonus.

"I told them before we got on stage that I don't care if we get 24th," he said. "All I care about is that they get up there and they sing a message to these people in the audience who love music because our best may not be the actual best, but that's OK. If we don't do our best, there's nothing more that we can do."

Before Scriven arrived at McKay, the school's entire choir consisted of 70 students across four different groups. This year, 125 students were in the choir program and Scriven thinks about 180 will enroll next year when Scriven will add two more groups.

"The program is absolutely exploding, but it does take a few years for those new members and the big numbers to eventually get up to the varsity group," he said.

On Saturday, Scriven's group of 25 singers -- the smallest in the competition -- shined.

"I thought we sounded great, but I'm more proud of the spirit of the students," he said. "I think that when you love music, you work hard, you're disciplined and you give the music what it deserves, you're going to have a great performance. We did that."

North Salem also competed Saturday, taking home 13th. Under the direction of Kerry Burtis, the Vikings put on a lively performance, including singing "Balleilakka," an Indian song.

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