

Songwriter performs with Circle of Friends kids

By Jodi Schneider McNamee
Correspondent

Steve Seskin is more than a successful singer/songwriter and teacher; he's known for his exhilarating performances, and also has an undeniable connection with children. On Thursday evening, June 4, at The Belfry, Sisters Folk Festival (SFF), in support of Circle of Friends, presented Seskin in concert. Seskin performed a very unique song, with special performances by 15 lively children, kindergarten through eighth grade, who are mentored through Circle of Friends. The performance received an enthusiastic standing ovation.

The song they performed, "Circle of Friends," was written in less than two hours earlier that day at Sisters Elementary School, where Circle of Friends children gathered together with Seskin to write a tune based on their experiences with their Circle of Friends mentors/friends. The song was done in the round near the end, and there were a couple of champion singers on each part that helped carry the song through.

Seskin's 1998 hit ballad "Don't Laugh at Me," originally recorded by Peter, Paul and Mary, was the catalyst to his connection with kids and songwriting at schools. Seskin partnered with Peter Yarow, and that set in motion the program Operation Respect/Don't Laugh at Me. It was a

curriculum designed to foster respect and kindness in schools. One of the aspects of respecting others is not to bully anyone, and that is the positive message that Seskin conveys through his song and talks that he gives at school assemblies.

This anti-bullying program has been implemented in more than 20,000 schools across the country.

In 2005 Seskin started a new program in schools where he spends a day — or several days at a time — teaching the kids how to write a song.

"Mostly the songwriting I'm doing is specifically about kindness, respect, anti-bullying and self-esteem. The only difference today was that this song was targeted for what Circle of Friends is and what it means to these kids," Seskin said. "They were ready for this and they had a lot of ideas. We had a limited amount of time and my job as I see it was to facilitate these kids expressing themselves, so in the end, what I want them to feel like is that they wrote a song [with] a little help from me, rather than I wrote a song [with] a little help from them. At the end they were having a good time and all singing the song that we wrote, and that's how I gauge it."

"Circle of Friends is an amazing opportunity not only for the kids but for the mentors," he noted. "When you volunteer to work with a child I think as in any kind of



PHOTO BY JODI SCHNEIDER MCNAMEE

Steve Seskin performed along with many Sisters kids involved with Circle of Friends.

giving, you don't only give to the person you're trying to help, you give to yourself."

Seskin has worked with SFF since 2002 and performed at last year's festival. It made perfect sense to partner Seskin with Circle of Friends to raise awareness and support for them, while connecting the children to singing and songwriting that could inspire them to become involved in music.

The concert kicked off with Sisters High School Americana Project students Sedona Baer followed by Megan Ellsworth, who performs under the stage name Megan Rose.

Before introducing Seskin on stage, SFF Executive Director Brad Tisdell had this to say to the full house at The Belfry:

"If you think back in your own minds, maybe it was a parent, guardian or friend, community member, brother

or sister that just took the time to care, and tonight I really want to honor what great work Circle of Friends is doing and how important it is in all of our lives in a lot of ways. Duncan Campbell started this in Portland and I just want to honor the vision that he had in bringing this program to Sisters and the fact that it has happened and has had such an impact on many people in the community."

And just before his fourth number, Seskin called up the children, all wearing green Circle of Friends T-shirts donated by Western Title. Seskin asked for his T-shirt, so he could match them, and the crowd went wild. And that was before the standing ovation.

Right before the

intermission Circle of Friends Executive Director Debbie Newport took the stage with some heartfelt words:

"To our volunteer mentors, parents and guardians, take a deep breath and feel the circle that is around you from this community. This is one of the most amazing communities that exists, I believe, and we have an amazing ability to come together to not only take care of ourselves but to take care of each other, and that is what Circle of Friends is all about; it's a way for our community to come together and support everyone, and in this case each and every single one of our children."

For more information about becoming a volunteer for Circle of Friends call Beth Hanson at 541-588-6445.

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