

Song Academy touches souls

By **Charlie Kanzig**
Correspondent

Walking up the path to the main lodge at Camp Caldera at Blue Lake, the sound of a banjo twangs through the trees and the strumming of a guitar and a ripple of laughter waft in the breeze. A palpable sense of peace is present.

The Americana Song Academy, in its 17th year in association with the Sisters Folk Festival, provided 85 attendees with a rare mix of place, creativity, community, and, of course, music, music, music from September 3-6.

More than 20 of the artists slated to perform at the Sisters Folk Festival joined the “students” for four days of workshops, mentoring, open mic time, fellowship and jam sessions as a means to hone skills, learn new techniques, and bask in the love of songwriting and performance.

In a workshop Thursday morning by “Stand and Sway” artists Beth Wood and Ara Lee James, the session began with the circle of 25 holding hands and performing a group hum, which soon grew into spontaneous harmonies and melodies. This simple exercise seemed to symbolize what took place in the camp all week: creating a space of safety, camaraderie, open-heartedness, and learning.

Artist Dave McGraw of the duo Sway Wild said, “As far as camps and festivals go, this is sort of the center of the universe for me.”

Other campers and artists echoed that sentiment throughout the day. For Greg Troll of Portland, a retired doctor who has been to the Academy “nine or 10 times,” being stretched to perform in front of a live audience has meant the most to him.

“I think one element of song camp that gets

underrated is the importance of doing performances. When we do performances it ups all of our games and it’s really helpful to break into performing in front of a truly empathetic audience,” he said.

Sisters resident Jack Nagel has volunteered as a kitchen helper for more than a decade just to be able to take in some of the magic of the camp.

“I do a little bit of percussion, so I sometimes join the jam sessions in the evening, and there are times when I just stop playing and marvel at the talent and energy around me,” he said.

Brad Tisdell, creative director of Sisters Folk Festival, sees the camp as a somewhat hidden, but integral, part of the organization’s outreach and impact.

“People may not understand the depth and breadth of the festival, but when you think about it, the song academy alone covers a lot of ground,” he said. “The artists come and give of themselves to adult and teenage students. Those artists become friends of the Sisters community and there is a synergy that is created which actually continues year to year. There are many levels for people to be engaged.”

Emma Horner, a senior at Sisters High School and committed member of the Americana Project, got a few minutes of a guitar finger technique session with members of the trio The Brother Brothers and said, “It’s amazing how much you can learn in such a short time with expert musicians like these guys,” she said.

Horner was one of three current SHS students to attend the camp along with fellow seniors Sierra Henneous and Chloe Gold.

After lunch on Thursday, fifteen campers got the opportunity to perform during an open mic session and many alluded to how important, and scary, getting on stage for the first time can actually be.

One performer, who introduced himself as Greg, took the stage and said that his would be a protest song and went on to tickle the crowd with a clever tune depicting his inner battle with the expectation of “having” to write a song, but not wanting to do it. His creation, titled, “I’m not going to write a song” ended to a standing ovation.

Dennis McGregor of Sisters is deeply rooted to the Folk Festival as a graphic artist, mentor, and performer. He says that the very first Song Academy truly impacted his life — and it almost never happened.

As McGregor recalls it, he read about the Song Academy in *The Nugget* and dismissed it as not applying to him.

“I had been writing songs since I was a teenager and had played music professionally for over a decade, so I thought it was something you just do.”

Then he ran into Brad Tisdell, who urged him to take part in the camp, but McGregor was unswayed. Tisdell remained persistent.

“Brad told me that only 11 people had signed up and that if they didn’t get 12 the camp wasn’t going to happen, so I finally agreed,” McGregor recalled.

Camp Caldera did not exist at the time of the first Song Academy. “The hearth building wasn’t built yet, so it was just a crude little tipi village. It was very intimate and I was very affected by it, which surprised me. It wasn’t



PHOTO BY CHARLIE KANZIG

Dennis McGregor with a camper from the Americana Song Academy at Caldera. McGregor attended the very first song academy, and it was a transformative experience.

that I learned that much about songwriting, but that I was inspired,” he said.

It was the fact that other campers, as well as the instructors, had made the effort to come a long way to be part of the camp that intrigued McGregor.

“I thought that if they cared that much to make that sort of effort, I should care more myself,” he said. “By the time the camp ended I was sort of lit up, and once I got home I really started writing songs.”

The results of his inspiration included winning the Sisters Folk Festival songwriting contest the following year. He has been an annual attendee at the camp where he serves as a mentor and

instructor.

“It’s something I really enjoy,” he said. “It’s bringing people together with a common interest and you celebrate the things you love. It’s a loving place, you know. Everywhere you go people are encouraging, non-critical and caring,” he said. “It’s sort of a model for the world — if only the world could be this way.”

Tinker Hatfield, a designer from Portland, comes to the camp as an added layer to his creative life and summed up the unique atmosphere of the camp this way:

“The song camp is all about peace, love, and light; and it just happens to be music that delivers that message,” he said.

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