

PRESIDENT'S PAGE

Kathy Perconti – NYSSMA® President



MUSIC FOR LIFE: FROM STUDENT TO CHAPERONE—A ©DISNEY JOURNEY

In 1979, I boarded a bus with the rest of our high school band and headed to *Walt Disney World*® Resort. Looking back now, I could never have imagined that the experience would shape not only my own life but also the lives of hundreds of students I would eventually teach.

Walt Disney World® was a very different place then. There was only one park—the *Magic Kingdom*® Park. Our high school band traveled 24 hours by bus, and before our performance we were taken behind the scenes to prepare for the parade down *Main Street, U.S.A.*® We were strictly forbidden from taking photographs backstage, preserving the mystery that Disney Parks was famous for creating.

To be honest, I remember very little about the parade itself. What I do remember vividly is what happened afterward. Once we were released into the park, I immediately grabbed one of my friends and dragged her to all the best rides. Three years earlier, in 1976, my family had visited *Walt Disney World*®

Resort for the first time. Because of that trip, I considered myself something of an expert. I knew exactly where to go and what attractions were worth our precious time. For a teenager, the excitement was unforgettable. What I did not realize then was how deeply that experience would stay with me.

Years later, after becoming a music teacher, I often found myself thinking back to that trip. It was more than just a performance opportunity. It was a chance to experience something larger than ourselves—to travel, perform, learn, and bond with classmates in a unique environment. I knew that if I ever had the opportunity, I wanted to give my own students a similar experience, only better.

For the past twenty years, I have been fortunate to chaperone numerous student trips to *Walt Disney World*®. Every time we go, I am reminded that these experiences are fundamentally different from a family vacation. Students are immersed in opportunities designed specifically for young musicians and performers. They return home not only with memories but with new skills, greater confidence, and a deeper understanding of what music can offer throughout their lives.

Among the most meaningful experiences have been

the Disney Imagination Campus: Performing Arts Workshops. One of my favorites is the Soundtrack Sessions vocal workshop. Students learn repertoire from a Disney production while strengthening fundamental musical skills such as breath control, diction, sight-reading, and ensemble singing. They explore how phrasing and dynamics can transform notes on a page into an emotional performance. I have been lucky enough not to repeat a show, en-

countering something new with every trip!

The workshop goes far beyond traditional rehearsal techniques. Teaching Artists provide vocal instruction and guide students through activities that simulate professional performance. Students create voice-overs during a soundtrack recording session. Eventually, the musical medley is synchronized to ©Disney film footage. There's even an opportunity for the director to have a cameo. Watching the final product is always inspiring. Students who may have entered the workshop feeling nervous or unsure leave with a sense of accomplishment and pride. They begin to see themselves not just as students, but as performers.

Another workshop that has had a tremendous impact on



Wayne Central High School Band and Chorus students, April 29, 2022—President Perconti's 60th Birthday

our students is Disney Broadway Magic. This experience introduces students to the core components of musical theater through active participation. They work on vocal technique, character development and choreography while learning a scene from a ©Disney stage production. Under the guidance of professional teaching artists, students move through fast-paced rehearsals that culminate in a polished final performance. Along the way, these budding musicians gain valuable insight(s) into audition techniques, collaboration and the importance of every role in a production. They also learn how professionals handle unexpected challenges on stage—an important lesson not only for performers but for life in general.

Perhaps the most memorable aspect of these workshops is the interaction with the Cast Members themselves. Students hear firsthand stories about the realities of performing professionally and the dedication required to succeed in a highly competitive industry.

Beyond the workshops, our students have also had opportunities to perform throughout *Walt Disney World*® Theme Parks. Several groups have given concerts at *Disney Springs*®. While the performance process itself is similar to that at many other venues, there is something special about knowing that Cast Members are overseeing every detail. As a conductor, I often joke that my job becomes wonderfully simple—I just conduct while *Walt Disney World*® handles the rest.

Then there is the experience that stands above all others: the Candlelight Processional at EPCOT®. For a high school choir, it is difficult to imagine a more extraordinary performance opportunity. Students join hundreds of singers on a world-class stage, accompanied by a professional orchestra and a celebrity narrator. The preparation is extensive. Choir

members typically memorize fourteen to sixteen selections and devote months to learning the music. Upon arrival, there is a lengthy rehearsal before the performance. And then, suddenly, everything comes together. The lights. The audience. The orchestra. The narrator. The voices of hundreds of singers blending together in a powerful expression of music and community. Magic is an overused word when discussing *Walt Disney World*®, but in this case, it truly fits.

What makes these experiences so meaningful is not simply the destination. It is the growth that happens along the way. Students learn responsibility, teamwork, discipline and perseverance. They discover new possibilities for themselves

as musicians and performers. Many create friendships and memories that remain vivid long after graduation.

As teachers, we often hope that something we provide our students will stay with

them for years to come. My own trip to *Walt Disney World*® Resort in 1979 certainly stayed with me. Decades later, I can still picture moments from that experience and remember how it made me feel. That trip influenced my Music for Life journey. It inspired me to create similar opportunities for generations of students who followed. Every time I watch a student step onto a stage at *Walt Disney World*®, participate in a workshop, or experience the wonder of performing at the Candlelight Processional, I am reminded of the high school student who once climbed onto a bus headed for the *Magic Kingdom*®. The impact of that journey continues today, not just in my life, but in the lives of the many students who have shared their own ©Disney music memories along the way. That is the true power of Music for Life: one meaningful musical experience inspiring another. ||

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