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LINDA BLACKFORD

## *Chicago Children's Choir alum to create first branch in Lexington for 'life changing' art*



**BY LINDA BLACKFORD**

NOVEMBER 22, 2022 11:45 AM



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Baritone Michael Preacely has sung in opera houses all over the world, but as a teen, he didn't even know he could sing.

That changed in 10th grade when a friend of his in Chicago persuaded him to join the Chicago Children's Choir, the 5,000 member ensemble created out the Civil Rights Movement that spread across numerous communities in Chicago. Its name was recently changed to Uniting Voices Chicago.

"My friend Mike said, you can sing and they teach you all this stuff," Preacely said. "He was a music geek and I was one as well, and that's how I got involved."

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The Chicago Children's Choir led Preacely to places like South Africa, where he sang for Nelson Mandela, and onto his professional career where's he's starred in operas like "Tosca" and "Porgy and Bess." Twelve years ago, it landed him in Lexington, where he did graduate work with University of Kentucky Opera Director Everett McCorvey, and ended up teaching in the School of Music.



Preacely has three children of his own, and noticed that while there are some choral opportunities for children in Lexington, there was nothing that offered the cultural breadth and depth he experienced in Chicago.

“I felt like we needed a musical ensemble that spans all voices, that’s multicultural in makeup and musical offerings that’s accessible to all of our children,” he said.

So with the germ of an idea, he approached the officials in Chicago, and filled out an application for funding with the Black Prosperity Initiative at the Blue Grass Community Foundation. Everyone liked the idea, and this fall, Preacely received \$50,000 from the initiative, and an agreement for the first formal offshoot of the Chicago group to be named Uniting Voices Lexington.

The Chicago Children’s Choir had helped establish similar choirs all over the country, but they wanted to be more deliberate with outreach, said Christina DeMarea, the former CEO of UVC, who is now their special projects director.

“We know we have a proven model and approach, we know it transforms lives and communities,” she said. “When Michael who is an alum said ‘I have a vision for this,’ it was a logical step for us. He is a visionary, and we know he can carry out this mission in a way that is uniquely Lexington.”

Introducing Uniting Voices Chicago, formerly Chi...



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## UNITING VOICES LEXINGTON

Preacely is in the beginning stages of organization, but envisions a choir open to kids in 6th through 12-grade of all voice types. He plans on starting with auditions for about 40, who will meet twice a week. The choir will offer vocal music skills, theory and choreography. With a core group, he'll then hopes to expand.

"Being an audition organization doesn't limit, it gives better opportunity to see who you have," Preacely said. "We want to bring the children of Lexington together, to cross the divides of social and economic disparities, and create global citizens of the world."

As the organization expands, he hopes to follow the Chicago model of having groups in neighborhoods all over Lexington, so there's not as many travel constraints. Then those students come together for big performances.

He will have plenty of cheerleaders, it seems, like his former professor, Everett McCorvey.

"The makeup of the Chicago Children's Choir is a wonderful mix of young people of all gender and ethnicities from all social strata," McCorvey said. "It will be wonderful to have that type of young people's organization here in Lexington and Michael is the perfect person to lead it."

The Chicago model produces artists who become ambassadors for their community, DeMarea said.

"Our choir has given life changing, pivotal opportunities to kids — these kids are raised to be civic ambassadors, that is drilled into them as much as the music," she said. "They will be the ambassador choir for Lexington because they will look like Lexington — diverse, youthful, relevant."

Lexington will have a taste of what's coming in January, when UVC brings its Voice of Chicago ensemble to perform at the city's annual Martin Luther King Jr. celebration.

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The Saturday before, on Jan. 14, interested children can workshop with the choir at Immanuel Baptist Church, and later that day be part of a performance.

Preacely has already run the idea by people like Mayor Linda Gorton, who called it a “wonderful opportunity” for Lexington children. “Michael Preacely is an enormous talent and it’s really fantastic that he is sharing his love of music and singing with our young people.”

For more information about the endeavor, email Michael Preacely at [michaelpreacely.com](mailto:michaelpreacely.com). And we can all put on our Thanksgiving gratitude list that we live in such an arts-rich community that is set to get even bigger.

“Boundaries are set in place by societies and system, but I’ve always crossed them,” Preacely said. “Music is universal, it is not for one group or one set of people. We want to create artistic, global citizens of the world and of this amazing city. That’s the goal.”

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Linda Blackford writes columns and commentary for the Herald-Leader. She has covered K-12, higher education and other topics for the past 20 years at the Herald-Leader.

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