

VESTAVIA HILLS HIGH
SCHOOL SINGERS:

*What Tail
Wags Your
Dog?*

The Vestavia Hills Singers is a small-mixed show choir at Vestavia Hills High School in Vestavia Hills, Alabama. Vestavia Hills is a suburban community located about ten minutes south of Birmingham. The schools are stellar, and many families make sacrifices so that their children can grow up in this community—a community that values education. The Singers have always been known for their superior vocals and for always bringing a little something different to their competition shows. For example, in 2001 the Singers were performing music from *Songs for a New World* before most audiences had heard of this musical. They are also well-known for their unique costuming and set design.



A Program in Transition

Dr. Megan Wicks-Rudolph accepted the job at Vestavia Hills High School in 2000. She was the third director in three years. The program was in transition and there were three show choirs and one concert choir. Due to the transitions, the choral department lacked discipline, structure and students who actually knew what they were doing musically. At that time, show choir was the tail that wagged the dog. Dr. Rudolph knew that this needed to change in order to have a successful choral program.

Megan Rudolph had gone to school in the mid-west and had student taught with the legendary J.D. Smith at Findlay High School. Findlay First Edition was, and still is, one of the top show choirs in the nation. Rudolph remembers the first rehearsal she witnessed. "It was like being at a show at Disney World!" she recalled. The professionalism, dedication, and excitement were evident. Right then and there she knew that this was the way she would emulate her future program.

Every one of the show choir students in FFE was a part of another choir during the school day. This helped ensure that they had a very firm foundation of good choral singing. John Baker, former director at

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Enterprise High School, Show Choir Camps of America Clinician, and show choir judge said, "The major difference between show choirs in the Southeast and other show choirs is that the other show choirs in the country base their singing in a concert tradition." This has always been Rudolph's philosophy, and she has worked tirelessly to make sure that show choir is not the tail wagging the dog at Vestavia Hills High School.

Currently there are eight choirs at Vestavia Hills High School. There are six concert choirs, one a cappella pop group and the Singers. Throughout her tenure, the program has grown from 130 to over 280 students signed up for choir for the 2016-2017 school year. All choirs are extremely successful at state, regional, and national festivals. The upcoming school year will mark the second invitation to the Vestavia Hills High School Choral Department to participate at Carnegie Hall in the COA Choir Nationals for top choral programs.

The show choir has been extremely successful since the early 2000s. In 2005, the Singers became an all-girls group. During that time the girls won or placed in their division in every competition they entered. After that the group became mixed again and then in 2012-2013, even though



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they were still placing or winning in their division, there was not enough interest to even have a show choir. "I blame this one-year hiatus on myself. When I first arrived at Vestavia, I began emphasizing the other choirs in order to build up the concert choir portion of the choral program. So instead of kids wanting to be a part of the show choir, despite its many successes, they wanted to be a part of the Honor Choir. This was a good and bad move on my part," said Rudolph. After the one-year lapse, the Singers came back stronger than ever and the other seven choirs continued to thrive.

Adding a Second Director

Last year the Vestavia Hills School System approved the addition of a second choral director. Gavin Dover, a graduate of The University of Alabama, student taught with Dr. Rudolph the year before and she knew that he would be a tremendous asset to the already thriving choral program. "Gavin brings many strengths to this department. He is not only extremely skilled with concert literature, but he also has a tremendous passion for show choir. Plus, he is just an all-around fantastic person, who has a gift for motivating our students to be better than they were the day before!" said Rudolph. Additionally, in 2014-2015 nationally-known

choreographer Mike Weaver came aboard to begin choreographing for the Singers.

Rudolph said that she had always had local choreographers come in to stage the show or she did it herself, but she stated "It was time to step into the big leagues." Rudolph recalled having the conversation regarding Mike Weaver with Scott Raines, former director of Albertville CenterStage! and current director at Tift County (Georgia). Scott arranged a meeting with Mike during the Regional ACDA Conference. Rudolph said, "I remember I was presenting, and little did I know that Mike Weaver had entered the room. Later I remember thinking that he must have been impressed with the presentation because he agreed to choreograph for us." Weaver explained to Rudolph later that it would take three years for the show choir program to really take off. The upcoming 2016-2017 school year will be that pinnacle third year.

A Rapidly Growing Show Choir Program

Currently, the show choir is growing rapidly. The program has really taken off in the past three years. The Singers have won or placed in their division in all but two competitions over the past few years. Rudolph attributed

this success to a variety of factors, including hiring Mike Weaver and the addition of Gavin Dover to the choral program. "There is a united force of two passionate choral directors who insist on stellar character and morals," stated Dover. He went on to explain that Rudolph has laid a solid foundation and he is ecstatic to be a part of the team to take the program to the next level. "We are both passionate educators, who not only believe in the teaching of proper singing and impeccable musicianship, but also in raising upstanding individuals and future leaders," said Dover.

As the Singers approach a truly exciting year for their program, the Vestavia Hills community could not be more thrilled to see what the group brings to the show choir realm and to the city. This diverse group is made up of athletes, artists, mathletes, debate team and band members, just to name a few. They are the epitome of what we love to see in our students: leadership, excellence, teamwork, compassion and pride.

Dr. Megan Wicks-Rudolph and Mr. Gavin S. Dover are choral directors for the Vestavia Hills music program in Vestavia Hills, Alabama.

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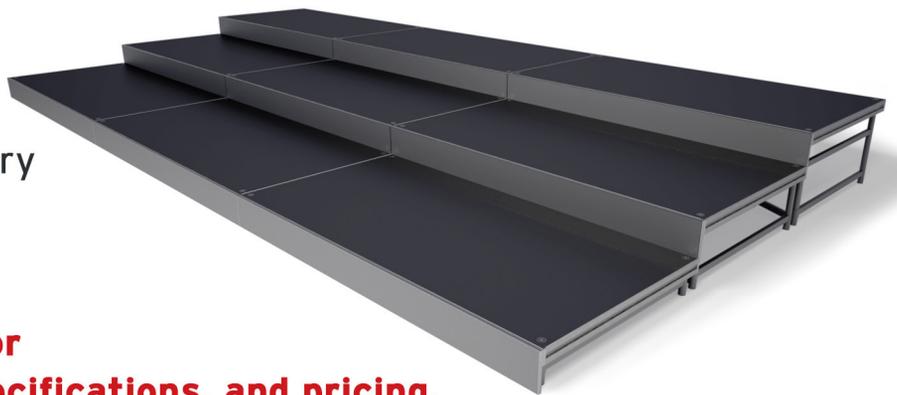


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