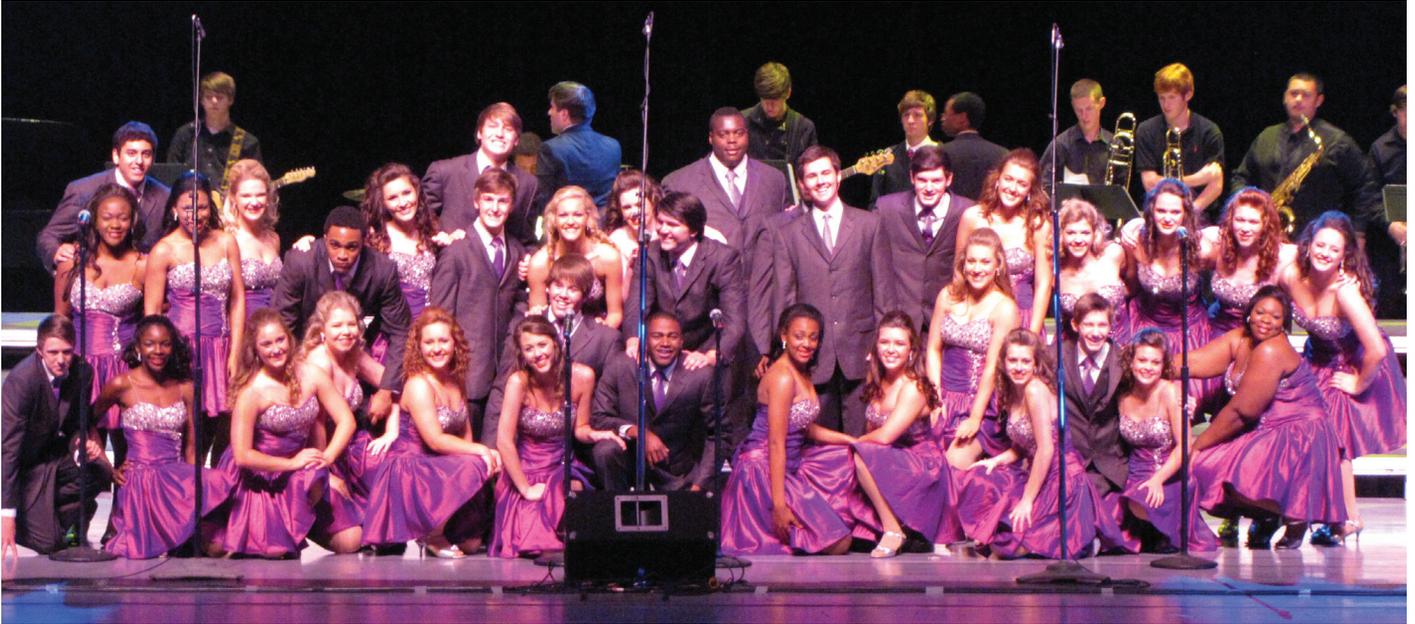


# CHOIRSPOTLIGHT

## Darren Dale and Oak Grove's Centerstage in Mississippi



Director Darren Dale is the youngest of five children and the uncle to ten nieces and nephews—all of whom live within ten minutes of his parents in Clinton, Mississippi. Though he did recently change jobs and moved from Opelika, Alabama, to Hattiesburg, Mississippi, Dale still isn't able to visit more often than he did when he lived five hours from the rest of the Dale clan. The life of a Show Choir director is just too busy.

Dale also had to transition into a new situation, but an already established group, when he changed positions. Though starting a group from scratch certainly would have its challenges, it's also difficult to step in for a beloved director and pick up from mid-game so to speak.

"It's tough coming in to a new situation; they are very set in their ways," Dale notes. "Maybe it's a Southern thing, but people can be very resistant to change—every little change."

Luckily, as a Southerner from birth, Dale understood that and didn't feel a need to immediately put his stamp on everything. However, Dale wasn't hesitant to make modifications when needed. "Nobody's perfect and I love hearing ideas from other people," Dale notes, using the parallel that Show Choir directors are accustomed to judges' opinions being shared on a regular basis. "You might take it and apply it, or you might recognize that idea doesn't make sense for your group," Dale adds. "You find that balance."

Instead of taking on the impossible task of pleasing everyone all the time, Dale shows students that they can also use their judgment when discerning constructive and useful criticism from the nonsense. He explains to students that they know the difference between a quality performance and a weak performance, so he wants them to use their judgment too when assessing their effort, not just rely on others' opinions. "Take responsibility for what can be handled," Dale adds, "and don't make excuses."

On the same note, he's open to hearing ideas from parents, but he's not scared to say when something is not a good idea. When he took over, he did change what he believed needed to be changed, but he kept everything that could be kept. If he were advising a director in a similar situation, someone who had to take the reins from another director here Dale advises to "stand up for yourself," and know when to change something and when to stand firm. "You just have to be confident in your abilities and know your decisions are best for the group—no wishy washiness."

### TRANSITIONING AND TAKING CHARGE

Hayley Higgason recalls the day Mr. Breland, their former director, announced that he would be leaving. "Within minutes, there was not a dry eye in the room" as they wondered, "Will we find a new director that fits in with us as well as Mr. Breland did?" Higgason knew the administration put together a committee with parents

and teachers to help find the best person for his replacement. “Knowing that there were parents involved in the process slightly put my mind more at ease, but I was still doubtful that our group could ever be the same, much less improve.”

Higgason recalls, “I remember sitting in my room, just watching TV, when my mom knocked on the door and asked if we could talk. “We know who your new director is going to be. You’re not going to believe me...the director from Opelika.”

Instantly recalling the Show Choir and school—because they had been enthralled with their performances—Higgason knew exactly which director her mother meant. “Then I started to cry, because I knew that we were going to be okay.”

One of the first changes Dale made, Higgason shares, was moving us from small mixed division to large mixed division. “Everyone was doubtful and scared because ‘No one does well their first year in big groups.’ We figured it would just be a learning experience and a test run type year. Well, needless to say we exceeded our expectations by qualifying for and placing eighth at FAME Nationals in Chicago.”

Higgason notes, “Now we all love Mr. Dale, and know he was definitely the best choice for us. He made sure that our former director, as well as some of his support staff, were still involved with the group because he knew how much they meant to us and how much we meant to them. It eased our transition knowing that they were still in this too—and that they supported Mr. Dale.”

Fellow group member Austin Querns explains that he was initially afraid Dale wouldn’t like them as a group because they were so in awe of Dale’s work with his previous Show Choir and his competition sets. “But Mr. Dale worked with us and made us better and made us feel like a family.”

Higgason adds, “Mr. Dale has brought a new excitement and freshness to the group. No one else could fit in with us better and the group is still just as close as it used to be, if not closer.” Mary Margaret Hyer, another Centerstage member, adds that Dale has “made show choir look ‘fun’ and ‘cool’ to our student body, and was able to have almost twice as many boys join show choir this year than last year. He also took several of us to Decatur, Illinois for Show Choir Camps of America over the summer, which was probably the best week of my life, so far.”

Hyer adds that, though everyone was sad when Breland retired, the overall transition period went extremely smoothly. She notes, “Mr. Dale is the best possible replacement we could’ve gotten, and Mr. Breland now plays keyboard in Centerstage’s band, so he is still very much a part of Centerstage.”

Hyer notes, “A lot of us were intimidated by our competition (Clinton, South Jones, Albertville, etc.), but we ended up making finals everywhere we went. Mr. Dale has been a great addition



to our family, and we love him and what he has done with our group very much.”

## FINDING CONSISTENCY AND CREATIVITY IN BLOCK SCHEDULING

There was one important thing Dale would have preferred to adjust when first taking over at Oak Grove. Because they have block scheduling, students take four classes in fall and four in the fall; however, four are core classes. Though this presumably leaves four choices, the truth is there are other requirements either from the school system or parental pressure: health, computer class, driver’s education, etc. Then, if that student has an interest in dance but also has an interest in band, what can he or she do?

When Dale learned that some students who faced this predicament could only participate in Show Choir one of the two semesters, he wanted to lay down an edict that a performer must choose. However, he almost immediately realized that he would lose all the football players and the girls on the dance team.

He also realized he couldn’t ask for a sacrifice like that in his first days, before they knew what the payoff would be. So, that was one concession that was a necessary evil. Though one might assume that there would be jealousy or bitterness if some of those half-the-year performers were given a solo or a featured spot in a number, Dale says that’s not the case.

“There’s definitely a lot of drama in high school show choir, but that’s not an issue.” In fact, if someone is not in the class year round, he expects that person to work even harder. He also realizes that it’s not that these students are “faking out or picking easy electives”; instead, these were students who wanted to do it all, and were willing to work harder and longer to make that happen. Those are exactly the types directors want in their groups.

## FINDING THE TIME IN BLOCK SCHEDULING

Centerstage member Karstan Smith notes that, though she wasn’t able to take certain classes in order to participate in Show

Choir, she believes there are advantages to the block schedule in that they have more time to reach perfection on their showcases through uninterrupted practice. "When on period schedule," she adds, "we would have to rush the process and it will cause a lot of frustration."

However, not all students see the benefits as outweighing the negatives. Several students have paid to take an online class so they can still manage their extra-curricular interests. Senior Hayley Higgason explains that while the block schedule is great in theory, it is very inconvenient for students actively involved in extra-curricular activities. "Because of scheduling issues, I had to take a required foreign language online at home. After a long day at school, I would have to come home, work on homework, go to rehearsals, come back home and 'go to class' (online), then finish the rest of my homework all before bed. I got used to living off of four to five hours of sleep very quickly. Also, there were several AP classes I was scheduled to take that I had to drop in order to stay in show choir and yearbook all year."

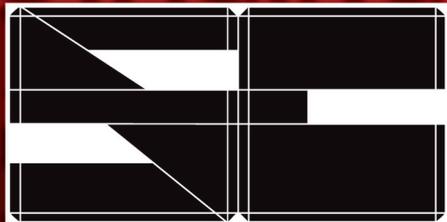
Booster Club President Karen Morris has two daughters currently in Centersage: Meredith (17) and Leslie (14). Her youngest, Gretchen (8), is also a lover of the arts—like Karen and

her husband Jeff—so the entire family is familiar with song and dance, and they are also all too familiar with scheduling conflicts and hassles.

Morris notes, "With block scheduling, you can't do it all; you have to pick and choose. You have to narrow down your interests and hope that nothing conflicts. Our middle daughter would have loved to be in Drama, too, but we made her choose one or the other." So far, her daughters have been able to make time for everything, but Leslie will need to sit out the first 9 weeks of her junior year to fit in everything.

Higgason, who is a senior in her third year of show choir, knows all too well that you can't do everything. She grew up as a competitive swimmer, and was ranked in the top five in the state, but she really wanted to see if she could make show choir fit with her schedule. "I had no idea how big of a commitment I was making. During her sophomore year, she shocked her parents by saying she wanted to leave swimming—which felt like her job—and focus on show choir, where she felt like she was part of something more. "Show choir made me realize how much of my life I was a wasting spending all of my time doing something I didn't really love. I realized that my home was on a stage, not in a pool."

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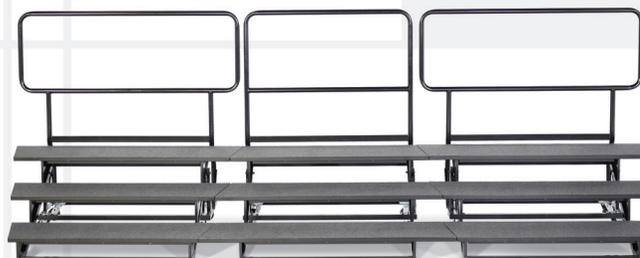
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Stephanie Querns adds of her son Austin, "Thankfully, we haven't had to sit out a semester of show choir because of scheduling. I don't think he could stand it if he wasn't in that class all year. He just loves it." However, she knows if Austin decides to add Drama that he might end up having to take an online class to fit it all in.

Hyer, a junior at Oak Grove, also notes that the long practices offered by block scheduling—which prevent long nighttime practices—are definite benefits to the performance level, but she's not at all sold on the idea that Show Choir shouldn't satisfy the PE requirement. "It SHOULD count as a PE class because dancing and singing a 25-minute-long show is something that not many people can do without conditioning (and I know some of our athletes couldn't do it). Fortunately for me, PE is offered as an online course, so I will be taking PE online my senior year in order to graduate with all my required elective credits."

Block scheduling presents another challenge for educators as well. Dale notes, "In show choir, it's impossible to stay 'on task' for 96 minutes if your class consists of singing and dancing." Common sense tells us that students can't roll on nonstop for over an hour and a half, and directors just have to hope they



have administrators that recognize this reality. "Breaks are part of the process," Dale adds, "Sometimes the administrators who understand how this works the best (the necessary break from constant activity) are the coaches." Also, just like in sports, "If you don't practice, you don't play."

### ADMINISTRATIVE SUPPORT BEYOND FINANCES

Karstan Smith shares how supportive their administration has been "which is a blessing, seeing as how most schools don't



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show love and support. They provide what they can as far as the finances are concerned, but our community really shows financial support through their donations and sponsorships, as well as donations from teachers and staff."

Hayley Higgason echoes that sentiment: "Our administration has always supported the arts. While many schools are losing their arts programs and cutting back on costs, our school has been very supportive and done everything they can to help us. Though we may not receive a lot of money from the school, they show support in other ways. Someone from the administration is always at all of our performances and they come to every competition that they can."

Higgason also speaks to ways administrative support can affect support in other spaces. For instance, the student body and shows their support by asking about their competitions and coming to performances. "I'll never forget two years ago we performed for the school and people went crazy. We felt like celebrities after it was all over. We checked Twitter and Facebook afterwards and people were posting things like 'Holy cow our show choir is amazing' and 'Why am I not in show choir?' It was so much fun."



In fact, all of the Centerstage students and parents share how consistent the administration has been in terms of emotional support. Several mentioned that recent principal, Wayne Folkes, made time to pull away from a conference in Orlando in order to watch the Show Choir at their biggest competition of the season.

Hyer notes, "Financially, however, the administration is not as supportive. Being from south Mississippi, sports are a HUGE deal, and so most of the school funding goes to our football program. The Fine Arts programs at Oak Grove High School get very little funding, which is unfortunate because of how good our show choir program is becoming. I love my school, but if I could change one thing about it, I would give less money to sports programs and more money to the arts."

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The booster club president, Karen Morris, adds that the school “supports the arts as much as possible.” She explains that Oak Grove is one of three high schools in their district that is supported by the tax base of a rural county. “Therefore, we must share resources equally and, unfortunately, that sometimes limits available funds to the Show Choir.”

Fellow Show Choir parent Stephanie Querns agrees that there has been sporadic financial support, but she also notes “the district has started talking about building a Performance Arts Center for the school again, so we like to think we contributed to that.” Morris adds that everyone seem to be in favor of a Performing Arts Center for the school, if they can just secure funding. She concludes, “But regardless of whether we have funding, our school administration supports the arts in body and spirit.”

### ON AIMING FOR PERFECTION

Though Dale understand no one is perfect, that doesn't necessarily keep him from working towards that as a goal. However, that perfection is really just a reflection of complete and total effort. In other words, he needs 100% or at least needs them to “pretend” they are at 100 percent. Of course, he

understands that not everyone is cut out for this commitment, and he has “total respect” for any students who recognize they can't give their all and move on to something else.

“If you put in hard work, only positives come out of it—that might be a trophy, and it might be just knowing you did everything possible.” That balance for him, between pushing just a little bit more to excel and knowing when to ease back on the throttle, is a constant goal; he knows, “There's always a little more those kids can give, but you don't want to push so hard that it's no longer an enjoyable experience.”

In fact, he thinks that's good advice for the directors too, especially directors who are stepping into an already established program and inheriting a team of performers. Because music programs across the country are often struggling for funding, when an administration is lucky enough to secure a creative, driven, and talented person to join their team, their impulse will be to engage that person in all sorts of creative endeavors. The new employee will feel pressure—both external and internal—to comply. Dale advises other newcomers to a music program to avoid becoming immediately overwhelmed by saying “yes” all the time. “Set boundaries,” he urges, “This is supposed to be fun for directors too.”

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