



Submitted photo

Shining Stars

Inuit youth choir, Ullugiagatsuk, to perform in Ottawa on Canada Day

story by Holly Lake

Most choirs have no trouble carrying a tune. However, in the case of Ullugiagatsuk, the province's newest youth choir, its singers are getting ready to carry that tune all the way from Labrador's northern coast to Ottawa later this month.

They're set to take part in the Unisong Choral Festival at the end of June, which is Canada's premiere event for choirs

of all ages. The event draws hundreds of singers from all corners of the country, and as part of the festivities, everyone involved will perform with a well-known Canadian conductor on Canada Day in the nation's capital.

Ullugiagatsuk Choir Director Janet Wiseman says she's thrilled their application to be a part of this was accepted.

"It's going to be a completely new experience for some of the students," she says. "They're excited."

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There are 16 students in the choir, ranging from Grades 7 to 12. They call the Nunatsiavut home, hailing from Nain, Hopedale, Makkovik, Postville and Rigolet.

As part of the festival, they'll have the chance to work with guest conductors and perform on their own in the days leading up to July 1.

"We're going to sing Labrador songs," Wiseman says. "We've had new arrangements made, and we're lucky, as Alan Doyle (of Great Big Sea fame) has allowed us to change some of his song *Shine On* to Inuktitut."

Also among the group's repertoire is Sid Dicker's *Labradorimiut, This is My Home* by Harry Martin and *Hymn to Freedom* by Oscar Peterson.

"They're all drum dancing," Wiseman says of the students. "And they'll all be in traditional coats."

Ullugiagatsuk will also perform several songs with the Shalloway Youth Choir out of St. John's. Last year a grant allowed the choir to commission a piece. The result was *Music of the Land*, written by Gary and Barbara Mitchell and composed by Kathleen Allan.

The choir premiered the song this year and it's now one of the 14 that will be performed when all groups at Unisong per-

form together July 1, backed by the National Arts Centre Orchestra.

Geography hasn't made it easy to get to Ottawa: It's presented challenges that other choirs at the festival likely won't have faced. Given that the students come from five different coastal communities (Wiseman is in Happy Valley-Goose Bay and Kellie Walsh, the choir's artistic and musical director, who holds the same role with Shalloway, is in St. John's) they haven't the luxury of practicing together several times a week.

Instead, the choir has gathered twice to practice, perform, brainstorm and build their identity: once in St. John's in February and once in Happy Valley-Goose Bay in the spring. They'll practice together again before heading to Ottawa.

Out of the gate, making this happen meant working around geography. Some audition tapes had to be recorded and sent in the mail when weather kept Wiseman and Walsh from visiting a community to hold them in person.

For the same reason, some meetings with parents of children who had been selected to be a part of the choir had to be done over Skype.



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It was made clear to students and their parents that being a part of Ullugiagatsuk would require a commitment to independent practice, using recordings and materials provided to them, as well as songs sent along to their teachers.

They were also expected to practice with school groups and other performers in their community.

iPads sponsored by Telus that have been making their way up and down the coast have allowed students to get acquainted through social media and post recorded practices online - with members of their own choir, as well as Shalloway.

"They've been documenting their path to Ottawa. We've got a huge support system," Wiseman says, noting none of this would be possible without the financial backing of the Nunatsiavut Government and the Newfoundland and Labrador English School District.

It's taken some effort and creativity, but it's been worth it. The group's name, Ullugiagatsuk, captures the idea that within each of us, there's a bright light that can help others. Wiseman says she seen it shine among the students, whether it's been giving input on their coats or the songs they want to sing - or stepping up to volunteer to do a tradi-

tional dance as part of the choir's performance.

"This is all about their culture. That's at the root of this. It's their name, the clothes they're going to wear, the songs they're going to sing, the mode they're going to present it," Wiseman says.

"People will have no doubt that these

young adults from Nunatsiavut are proud of where they come from.

"They're all going to sing together, stand together and they'll all have a smile on their face because they'll know they've created something that is wonderful."

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Wiseman says for the students to have the chance to sit and talk at with young people from Nunavut, French speakers from Quebec and every other part of Canada, to find out about their story, while sharing their own, will be an experience in its own right. Music is the universal language, after all, and it brings people together.

"It might just give them some ideas of places they'd like to visit, schools they might like to go to," she says. "This is just starting to open doors for them and they've got to embrace it all."

Some of the students, who are now in Grade 12, have been singing in choirs and performing at events such as the Pan-Labrador Experience since Grade 4.

Of the 16 members of Ullugiagatsuk, eight will graduate high school this year. Wiseman says given that part of their goal is to create leaders within this group of young people, they're exploring choral opportunities for the graduating students.

She says they'd like to create an apprenticeship or leadership program so that the students could apply to come back and mentor the members of next year's choir and at the Pan-Labrador Experience, as well as facilitate at workshops.

"I want them to be able to show the younger students, here are your mentors and your role models."

For Wiseman, the choir started off as an assigned duty, but

has very much become her passion.

"When I see kids take initiative and have that confidence in their ability, that makes me proud. I know these kids have something wonderful within them."

For now, the focus is on Ottawa and being a part of Canada's 150th birthday celebrations. Wiseman expects everything about their adventure to be a learning experience.

"I would like for them to feel empowered. I would like them to feel they've accomplished something very significant. I want them to think that the world is in the palm of their hands; that they can go and try anything they want," she says.

"This is their chance to shine. After all, there is a shining star within each of them." ♫



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