

Women Who Care boost after-school music program

Bruce Bartlett Telegraph-Journal

SAINT JOHN • The future of the Sistema music program for school children received a boost Wednesday when the local chapter of 100 Women Who Care voted to make their latest donation of \$23,770 to the program.

A presentation by Aaron McFarlane, director of the centre located at the Millidgeville North School, convinced a majority of members of Women Who Care to support Sistema. Group members commit to attending four meetings a year where they are each expected to write a \$100 cheque to the organization chosen through a vote, said Debbie Rathwell, one of the co-founders of the local chapter.

Members suggest organizations to support and then three are chosen randomly beforehand to make presentations at the quarterly meetings. On Wednesday, the other pitches for funding were from Fresh Start Services for Women as well as the Sweet Caroline Foundation. “It all happens really quickly. It is over in about 45 minutes,” Rathwell said.

Sistema grew out of a 2009 partnership between the New Brunswick Youth Orchestra and El Sistema, a South American-based music program aimed at schools. Sistema NB now operates out of four centres in Moncton, Saint John, Richibucto and Tobique First Nation. McFarlane said the Saint John program now serves around 200 students from Centennial, Hazen White-Saint Francis, Millidgeville North, Prince Charles, Princess Elizabeth, and Saint John the Baptist-King Edward schools. It has grown from the 50 it served when it started five years ago. “This means we can expand and offer the program to more students,” McFarlane said a day after the winning the extra funding. When students enrol in the program, they commit to spending three hours a day, five days a week, in a combination of lessons and practice on their chosen instrument, playing orchestral music. Students get a chance to learn every instrument in the orchestra except for bassoon and percussion.

The program is free of charge and instruments are provided. Students, who range in age from five to 13, are bused to Millidgeville North every afternoon and then returned to their neighbourhood at the end of the day. Sistema Saint John has a professional teaching staff of 16 this year giving lessons on 10 instruments. Although it is based in music, the big lessons are focus, discipline, respect and teamwork, McFarlane said. “These are the things that are essential for an orchestra, but even more to have a successful life,” he said. The teachers are a mix of performers and teachers, but most are performers in the community, McFarlane said. They are artists in the community who also teach.

The local chapter of 100 Women Who Care now has around 260 members, and they meet every three months at the Lily Lake Pavilion, Rathwell said. It is a low-maintenance organization that doesn't even have a bank account because the members write their own cheques to the chosen organization. “We are just the vehicle that makes the magic happen,” she said. Since its inception in 2013, the organization has donated \$272,429 to local charities.

New members are always welcome, and more information can be found at 100womensj.com .



From left, Wenxuan Gu, Nicki Schmidt, Calvin Rowe, Ricky Savoie and Alexandre Hovey, practising for the Sistema NB Saint John holiday concert that took place at Saint John High School Wednesday. Photo: Bruce Bartlett/telegraPh-Journal