

'King Island Christmas' Celebrates Community

Story Epitomizes Spirit Of Foundation To Help Families Of Critically Ill Children

By BETI TRAUTH
Beacon Correspondent

Sometimes, when people and ideas get together, there is a sense of something beyond serendipity.

That must have been the feeling that Fortuna couple Dan and Wendy Cooper had when they were introduced to internationally renowned musical composer David Friedman a little over a year ago.

That fateful meeting occurred when the Coopers had made yet another necessary trip to Duke University Children's Hospital in Raleigh-Durham, N.C. to get vital medical treatment for their son Matthew's brain tumor.

This particular treatment for 8-year-old Matt is not available at any other medical facility in the country, so the family made the decision to travel thousands of air miles every month to obtain it. (They've logged in over 90,000 — and counting.)

Monthly treatments for Matt had begun in San Francisco when he was just 3 years old, continuing there for almost five years. Then, his condition called for another type of medical measure to keep him alive — one that could be performed only by

the particular physician at the North Carolina hospital. The Coopers felt that they had no choice but to take him there.

The emotional and financial drain on them has been enormous over the years. And, after meeting other Humboldt families with sick children who also constantly travel out of the area to secure specific medical care for their children, the couple came to the conclusion that something needed to be done locally to ease those families' financial travel burdens.

The families had made use of some national organizations, such as the Corporate Angel Network. However, these organizations are typically much more restrictive in their guidelines and paperwork, and usually also have long waiting lists.

This could obviously be devastating when time is of the essence for care; so, the Coopers decided that they should create a local foundation to help these families. A small group of interested people got together, and a board was formed. But, what to call the foundation; and what to do for a fund-raiser to get things underway?



Beacon/ submitted photo

Internationally renowned composer David Friedman wrote the music for "King Island Christmas." His work has been performed at Carnegie Hall, recorded by numerous singers including Diana Ross and Barry Manilow, and heard on numerous television shows including "Touched by an Angel" and several Disney films including "Beauty and the Beast."

That's where the serendipitous meeting with Friedman comes in. When they shared their dream about a Humboldt County foundation that needed both a name and an idea for a fund-raiser, he offered a holiday oratorio for which he had written the music.

Premiered in 1997 at the Perseverance Theatre in Juneau, Alaska, it was called "King Island Christmas" — a musical celebration in oratorio form (a story told through song). The story was based on a true incident that occurred in Alaska during the winter of 1951, on

remote King Island in the Bering Sea.

While the villagers of the island anxiously awaited the ship bringing crucial provisions (and their beloved priest), a sudden Arctic storm froze the sea and made it impossible for the islanders to get to the ship to retrieve anything on board.

Determined, the community worked together to carry a large oomiak — a swift, canoe-like boat made with walrus skin — over the mountain that divides the island. They were able to bring their supplies and their priest to shore in time

to celebrate Christmas.

Friedman and librettist Deborah B. Brevoort (who initially came up with the idea for the musical adaptation of a story based on the incident) deliberately designed the piece so that it can work as a concert presentation or a staged production, accompanied by anything from a single piano to a full orchestra. They wanted to build in flexibility so that people could create a "King Island Christmas" that would reflect their own community.

Since the story, as one press release states, "celebrates the power of community and the importance of sticking together during times of trouble," the oratorio has become an annual holiday affair in cities all over the country. So, it was a natural choice for the Coopers and their new foundation's first fund-raiser in Humboldt County.

The name for the foundation was a natural too: The Oomiak Foundation, in honor of the mode of transportation used by a united community to help each other in a time of need and trouble.

Segue to Friday, Dec. 1, 2000, to the College of the Redwoods Forum Theatre where — thanks to the vision and determination of the board members of the Oomiak Foundation and the creative efforts of the Humboldt Light Opera

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Company — “King Island Christmas” will come to the North Coast.

Rehearsal for the production was done as part of a class at CR that started in September, taught by HLOC’s Carol Ryder. The large cast of local singers includes children who are part of HLOC’s KidCo performing group, which ranges in age from 6 through 13.

Singer and musician David Demant, a high school classmate of Wendy Cooper, is also involved in the musical end of the production team for the show; and pianist Sharon Welton will handle the playing of the score.

Everyone involved in the project is excited that both composer

Friedman and librettist Brevoort will be on hand for the opening weekend’s premiere performance at CR, and will attend a reception in their honor at the Morris Graves Museum in Eureka after the show.

All proceeds from the performances will go into the Oomiak transportation fund exclusively for Humboldt County families’ medical travel needs. The foundation plans to continue with two fund-raising events each year.

Although the opening night performance is already sold out (and two other performances donated for school children are closed to the public), four more performances are available to the general public. They are at 7:30 p.m. on Dec. 2, Dec. 8,

and Dec. 9, with a closing matinee at 2 p.m. on Dec. 10.

Tickets are \$10 for adults, \$8 for students and seniors, and \$5 for children under 12. No advance reservations can be made by calling either HLOC or at CR; but tickets can be purchased at the door or at the following outlets: Green’s Pharmacy and Center Pharmacy in Fortuna, Ring’s Pharmacy in Ferndale, Palco Pharmacy in Scotia, and North Soles in Eureka and Arcata. It’s advisable to buy tickets in advance, since the seating at the CR Forum Theatre is limited to 300.

By attending, you can be part of a community effort to help others. That’s what the Oomiak Foundation is all about.