

WNCC students take trip to international festival

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Shoreline of the town of Ermoupoli where Stinner and the students stayed. Buildings back to the Aegean Sea.

A group of students from western Nebraska returned from Greece in the early hours of July 24. They performed in different musical productions while there.

For three weeks, Rita Stinner, outgoing Music Program Director for Western Nebraska Community College, and 10 members of the WNCC Choral group participated in a trip where they contributed to several performances. Stinner was invited to Greece to attend the 11th International Festival of the Aegean. She invited leaders and other standout choir members.

Using their own personal resources and grant money, the group was able to go on the trip which was priced at around \$5,000 per person.

Funding for the trip was provided by the Oregon Trail Community Foundation, Western Nebraska Community College Foundation, The David and Ann Duey Trust, C.W. Yount

Foundation, Kelley Bean, Coral and Don Richards, Bob and Elaine Pile, The Foundation for Children and Families, William and Gretchen Peters, and PEO Chapter FC-NE. Funding was also provided by donations to the WNCC Foundation in the name of the Vocal Program. According to Stinner, it was a very affordable trip and the students were able to bond with local people and other chorus members.

The students were able to observe a lot and be in Greece at a time of critical historic events.

One of the students was Connor Zimmer, of Bridgeport. He said it was interesting to him to see the different cultures come together. "Just seeing how people live their lives and meeting people who have the same common interests and goals was really cool to see," said Zimmer.

Choir members from Nebraska Wesleyan University and Central Community College also were involved in the trip. There were roughly 50 students and chaperons who were involved in the performances and partnered in the activities.

The group participated in four performances for the Greek opera "Medea." There was also three other events that Stinner and the students were able to participate in. They performed Mozart's "Coronation Mass," Beethoven's "Choral Fantasy," and Faure's "Requiem." A sunset choir at the St. Nicholas Greek Orthodox Cathedral was also performed with choruses from Greece and other Nebraska and New Jersey college groups. Stinner and the students were able to perform their own solo sunset choir performance as well. There were sold out performances at the theater every night that they were there. The Festival of the Aegean is 12 days and creates a hot spot for tourists for the island of Syros during the summer.

The group rehearsed day and night to prepare for the performances.

"Rehearsals took place a week and a half before opening night. It was weird being thrown into something you're not so sure of as far as the accompaniment and everything," said Zimmer.

According to Stinner, the performances positively influenced the lives of the students and enhanced their abilities. Zimmer really enjoyed seeing and meeting the talent that was there from other countries. Musicians from 12 different countries joined them and were also featured in the performances. The performers and students performed at the Apollo Theater, which holds 400-500 people. It was designed and modeled after the famous La Scala di Milano Opera House in Milan.

One of the highlights of the trip was to be able to eat traditional Greek food. According to Stinner, Greece has the freshest foods in the world that are primarily grilled or baked with all-natural seasonings.

“One of the things I say is that they take yogurt and feta cheese to a new level of appreciation there,” said Stinner.

Stinner’s favorite meal consisted of cheese. “They had all different types of cheese and it’s not all feta. They put a slab of cheese on and grill it,” said Stinner.

She said that there is also a gelato store and bakery on every block in town. A popular lunch were gyros which people could get for a couple of euros.

The group started and ended their trip in the city of Athens. While in Athens they were able to see the Acropolis, Parthenon, and Mars Hill where the apostle Paul preached.

The group mostly stayed in the town of Ermoupoli on the island of Syros. It was a four hour ferry ride to the island after they arrived in Athens. It was not an expensive area of Greece where they stayed and Stinner compared the size of the town of Ermoupoli to Mitchell or Bayard. They were able to eat at the different restaurants regularly and developed some deep relationships with the local community. Both the people in the town and the choir members cried when the visit was over.

“They were the loveliest, most welcoming, dear and honest people I’ve ever met,” said Stinner.

Many people were worried about the group while they were in Greece because of the financial crisis, but Stinner said that there wasn’t the slightest hint of any problems while they were in Greece. They had complete access to ATMs day and night. There was no indication of a problem in the country during their time at Syros.

Activities consisted of visiting various beaches, swimming and shopping. Their hotel was very close to the Aegean Sea and they were able to walk the shoreline and go swimming there often.

Stinner is not going to be the music director for WNCC anymore after the summer is over as she is moving to Lincoln, but she will still be a strong advocate for the music program and the different arts programs.