

Choir helps WINGS catch new breeze

By **RAELYNN RICARTE**

News staff writer

The Mid-Columbia Community Choir is raising funds for a program to transition young males out of foster care into the adult world.

The choir of more than 70 members will perform its fifth annual Hymns of Thanksgiving concert in Hood River on Saturday. The doors at Riverside Community Church open at 6:45 p.m. and the program starts at 7:30 p.m. A \$10 donation is requested for Give Them Wings, a local nonprofit group commonly known as WINGS.

Special guests at the inspirational program include the Riverside choir, jazz pianist Tim Mayer and the Mid-Columbia Adventist Christian School Choir.

"I couldn't even speak when he (director Perry Cole) told me the choir was going to do this. I was just so blown away by their support," said Allyson Pate, director of WINGS.

"The community is embracing this project and that is a real blessing; it's just made my heart full."

Pate has used highlight moments, such as the concert, to get through months of infrastructure repairs — some unexpected — on WINGS' Rockford Road shelter. The newly furnished residence will soon be inhabited by four men, ages 18-23, which need structure to learn basic life skills.

GO AND SING

Hymns of Thanksgiving concert Saturday at Riverside Community Church; doors open at 6:45 p.m. and the concert starts at 7:30 p.m. A \$10 donation is requested for Give Them Wings. www.getwings.net

"If it takes a village to raise a child then it's going to take a community to raise this village," said Pate.

The new program is expected to cost WINGS about \$100,000 per year. To date, the organization has banked \$65,000 in donations and proceeds from fund-raisers, such as a recent hoe-down at Mosier Highland Ranch.

Pate anticipates that some large foundation grants may be attainable once WINGS has a proven track record of success. She said about one-third of the annual budget will also be paid by the tenants, who are expected to seek gainful employment.

She anticipates that the first clients of WINGS, who have yet to be selected, will be move into their new home within the next month. Shawn Sanders has been hired to serve as the "house parent" and provide 24/7 monitoring of activities. She will be assisted in that task by Adam Dickson, an AmeriCorps volunteer.

"We are looking for other volunteers to help teach these young men some basic skills, such as carpentry and mechanics," said Pate.

Dickson will organize the volunteer program and is asking community members to donate some of their spare time to a worthy cause. He would like WINGS clients to learn how to change a tire, install a faucet, bake a pie, sew, etc.

He is also seeking people to hire the young men, who will work under his supervision, and take them on recreational outings, such as snowshoeing, hiking or bowling.

The men who age out of foster care and enroll in the program have to meet achievement benchmarks. Pate anticipates the average client will live at the Rockford house for nine to 12 months, al-

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though the stay could be longer for some individuals.

"We are very excited about helping these young people get the support that they need to be successful in life," she said.

In May a group of concerned citizens tried to stop transitional use of the Rockford house. They circulated a petition in opposition WINGS' plan and presented it to the Hood River County Commission.

Area residents expressed concerns that the men, identified by WINGS as "at-risk," would engage in criminal behavior. Opponents of the Rockford site were not against helping youth who had grown up in state custody. However, they didn't believe a neighborhood with young families was an appropriate place to start the unproven program.

WINGS' intended use of the 3-acre property was allowed under current zoning so county officials declined to take any action.

The elected body was reminded by one citizen that Hood River's shelter for victims of domestic vi-

olence was sited in a residential neighborhood, as was transitional housing for young women, ages 18-24.

Pate believes keeping communication lines open with neighbors will gain their support. She said the young men selected for assistance will not be felons, sex offenders or drug users. She said the chosen individuals just need extra support to find their direction in life. She anticipates a high success rate with the comprehensive program that provides young adults who have "slipped through the tracks" with much-needed personal attention.