

arts & culture

Texas Tenors Honor Veterans at Charity Concert

The vocal group performed in front of a sold-out crowd at The Sharon L. Morse Performing Arts Center.

By TAYLOR STRICKLAND
Daily Sun Senior Writer

The theater was packed during the Texas Tenors moving tribute to veterans and their families.

The Texas Tenors, a three-time Emmy Award-winning classical crossover group, partnered with Villagers for Veterans for a fundraising concert Jan. 11 at The Sharon L. Morse Performing Arts Center. Guests had the opportunity to meet the tenors before the concert, to receive a signed Texas Tenors CD and the chance to win a guitar signed by all three members. Proceeds from the concert went to fund Ashley's House, a transitional home for women veterans.

"We all have family in the service," said tenor J.C. Fisher, country singer and founder of the Texas Tenors. "Villagers for Veterans — we're so honored to be involved with them."

The concert started with the national anthem, bringing the audience to their feet in honor of veterans everywhere. Behind the tenors, patriotic images of American soldiers, cowboys, cathedrals and landscapes flicked across a

projection screen during each song.

As part of the tenors' 15th Anniversary Tour, the concert covered all of the group's greatest hits, including "Che Bella Cosa," "Amazing Grace," "Boot Daddy," "Unchained Melody," "Lady" and "God Bless the USA." The tenors had the same charming stage presence that endeared them to audiences on "America's Got Talent" — playfully attempting to outdo one another and joking with audience members from the stage. Pop singer Marcus Collins came out to take photos with fans during breaks between songs and deliver a USB wristband containing their latest album, "Outside the Lines."

The audience leapt to their feet for their duration of "God Bless the USA," prompting Fisher to comment on the importance of honoring veterans and how the tenors never fail to pay their respects. "We would also certainly be remiss if we didn't mention that other group of people who make what veterans do possible," tenor John Hagen, whose specialty is opera, said. "Our VIPs — the spouses of veterans, their families and friends."

At the end of the show, Collins announced that the tenors will return to The Villages next year. He also thanked Villagers for Veterans for including them in the benefit for Ashley's House.



Michael Dwyer | The Associated Press

The Texas Tenors perform during the dress rehearsal for the Boston Pops Fireworks Spectacular in Boston in 2019. The group partnered with Villagers for Veterans for a fundraising concert at The Sharon L. Morse Performing Arts on Jan. 11.

Villagers for Veterans is a local 501(c)(3) organization founded to help veterans in need. The organization has four ongoing veterans programs for women, mobility and independence, service dogs and those in need of community connections. For the Texas Tenors concert, more than 97% of the proceeds help fund the ongoing construction on Ashley's House.

Ashley's House is built in honor of first lieutenant Ashley White, a U.S. Army Soldier who was killed during combat in 2011 during special operations in Afghanistan. Informational booths were set up before and after the concert

for guests to learn more and to donate by entering to win the signed guitar or purchasing engraved bricks.

"(Donors) can buy a brick and put whatever they want on it," said Paul Immordino, a U.S. Navy veteran and treasurer of Villagers for Veterans. "When we finish Ashley's House, we're going to put bricks around the flagpole."

Immordino, who likes to say he's from "the Village of Mount Dora," said those who buy a brick will also receive an invitation to the exclusive celebration planned for Ashley's House's grand opening.

To buy an honor brick, go to tinyurl.com/wk8j7dsf.

As for the signed guitar, the sleek black acoustic went to Karen Straffon, from Algonac, Michigan. Straffon was in The Villages visiting Immordino and his wife, Kathryn Wilgus, a retired nurse and U.S. Navy veteran as well as vice president for Villagers for Veterans. Straffon dedicated the winning ticket to "Deuce" — a nickname for Wilgus.

Straffon and Wilgus became friends following the death

of Sgt. Joseph Lilly, the son of Straffon's friends, who Wilgus took care of in Afghanistan. The tragedy connected the three families and created an enduring friendship.

"It's a good full circle," Wilgus said. "I'm glad she won, because she came to visit us."

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