

CLINTON TOWNSHIP

Chippewa Valley choir director earns award from autism group

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Chippewa Valley choir director James Pecar is pictured with Kathy Johnson, president of the Autism Society of Michigan. (Photo provided by James Pecar)

CLINTON TOWNSHIP — Growing up with a cousin who has autism, Chippewa Valley High School choir director James Pecar has always had a place in his heart for students with the condition.

As he grew into his musical career as a student and now an educator, Pecar has seen the positive impact that a good tune can have on a child with autism.

He has integrated his teachings and performances to help those with the condition, and for his efforts, he received the 2015 Stephen Tsai award from the Autism Society of Michigan in October.

“I’ve been involved doing things for the autism society and helping people with autism all my life, and it sparked kind of from seeing my own family and having it hit so close to home,” Pecar said.

The award is given to an outstanding educator who positively influences the lives of students with autism. Pecar began to see in high school how his interest in music could help those who struggle with the condition.

“I saw autism at a young age, then in high school I had an opportunity to have an independent study music theory class during a special needs music class, and that was something that really inspired me and I loved it,” Pecar said.

During his college career, he started the “A Capella for Autism” concert, which he has brought with him to Chippewa Valley.

The concert began with 80 high school singers but has grown to 320 performers in grades four through 12. For the next A Cappella for Autism concert, Pecar hopes to have more than 400 singers.

“I’ve seen a number of students with autism who sing in choirs, and it’s very important that our students and the community are educated about what autism is because there are people they see every single day of their lives who have autism, and not everyone is educated on it.”

By hosting the A Capella for Autism event, Pecar hopes his performers gain a valuable experience beyond their musical performances.

“I try to provide an opportunity to, one, inform our students and community, and have a cause or motivation behind their performances, and to come out of it with more than just a performance under their belts, with an educational and musical experience,” Pecar said.

Beyond the classroom and concert, Pecar also has his students volunteer with the Macomb/St. Clair chapter of the Autism Society of Michigan. This usually includes helping with the organization’s 5K run/walk at Stony Creek Metropark, and the annual Sweetheart Ball in February.

Up next for Pecar’s students will be a Nov. 5 concert at Dakota High School and a Dec. 8 concert at Chippewa Valley. Pecar and his students have also begun working on a musical version of “Shrek,” which will open the last week of January.