



Mike Ball, founder of Lost Voices and Gretchen Pleuss, the associate director of the non-profit stand amongst the results of one of the Lost Voices brainstorming sessions. Photo by Henry Spielman

'LOST' NO MORE

Transformative Plymouth nonprofit helps troubled kids find their voice, purpose

By Scott Spielman

Mike Ball was getting ready for a performance at The Ark in Ann Arbor when he stepped outside and heard a familiar voice call his name.

It turns out, the voice belonged to a young man Ball had met in a juvenile detention facility years earlier. Now free, cleaned up and ready for the future, the young man represented one of the many success stories for Ball's nonprofit, Lost Voices.

"It was amazing to see him," said Ball, a Plymouth resident whose non-profit is based in the Plymouth Arts and Recreation Complex (PARC) near downtown. "He has overcome so much. He's a survivor."

Lost Voices dates back to 2006 when Ball, a writer, humorist and singer/songwriter, was invited to the WJ Maxey Boys Training

School in Whitmore Lake for a career day. He was asked to talk to the kids, all of whom had been convicted of serious crimes, about writing.

"It was the first time I ever saw kids who were really in severe trouble. I realized that these were our kids; these are children, just like my own. They were just on a different path," said Ball. "Different things happened to them. It was also clear, just from talking with these kids, that they weren't born thieves and murderers and rapists—they were children. They had just been in a world that took them places that children shouldn't go."

Not a trained therapist, Ball still wanted to help. He applied for and received a grant to do a documentary on one of the young people—the man he later met outside the Ark. The National Endowment for the

Arts (NEA) got wind of it and approached him to do a program to help troubled youths. They essentially asked him what kind of program to run and his thoughts turned to songwriting.

"I knew the healing power of music," he said. "I had absolutely no plan on how we were going to do it, but I just knew that somehow I had to figure out a way to write songs with these kids."

Lost Voices grew out of that initial concept. Through the program, Ball takes a team of talented singers and song-writers into juvenile detention centers and other facilities for a week-long songwriting program.

On the first day, he and his team introduce themselves through folk and blues music. Then they work with the youths, both individually and as a group, to write songs about their experiences as a way to come to terms with their past and process their sense of self. Sometimes the songs are intense and personal, about their experiences or thoughts about leaving the facility and again facing the real world. Other times, they're just about pizza. The young people know, however, that at 4 p.m. the following Friday, they are scheduled to perform their work.

"It's basically four days to write and rehearse a whole show," Ball said. "It's really intense. Believe it or not, they do it every time. They have the courage to walk on stage in front of strangers and their peers—and I think performing in front of their peers is scarier for them—and pour their hearts out. They get a tremendous round of applause for what they've done in front of their peers, in front of strangers and they think: what I feel counts. What I think counts. A lot of these kids have never experienced that."

Lost Voices visits those kinds of facilities and others around the state as many as 14 times



Salem Witchcraft, a legendary local band that toured with top acts during the 1970s and 80s, reunited recently for a benefit program at the Marquis Theater in downtown Northville to raise funds for Lost Voices. Photo courtesy of Salem Witchcraft