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SELECT A TOWN



Merokean with autism finds voice in music

Posted June 27, 2019



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In Gotham Hall, Korins took part in a gala for Life's WORC, an organization that offers services to people and families with intellectual disabilities and autism in New York. COURTESY ELLEN KORINS



By Andrew Garcia (<mailto:agarcia@liherald.com>)

For Michael Korins, the stage is home.

At least, that's where he feels most comfortable. A 25-year-old Calhoun High School graduate with autism, Korins has difficulty communicating, often struggling to find the right words during conversation. But when he has a microphone or piano at his fingertips, he finds his voice.



Korins began taking piano lessons at age 4. By 13, he was taking singing lessons, his love of music already solidified. He would greet people with recognizable snippets of Mozart and Beethoven, obsessed over the Beatles and raided his family's CD collection, recalled his parents, Dan and Ellen Korins.

"One thing he doesn't have is stage fright," said Ellen, sitting beside Michael in their Merrick home. "Music and performing has a calming effect. Some of his happiest times are when he's on stage and performing."

In high school, Korins aspired to be in the spotlight. Although his parents and the school worried about him joining chorus, "He excelled," his father said. He qualified for the New York State School Music Association's All-State program, which accepts the state's best young musicians every year. He was the first person in the district's special needs Prep Program to achieve the honor, his parents said.

Since that NYSSMA performance in Rochester, Korins has made it a habit to return to the stage. He has a knack for performing in specific months and years of his appearances. He's in a vocal ensemble from FREE (https://www.familyaid.org) of the 12 Residences in the 505 Central Ave. of Fullerton that supports people with intellectual disabilities. In New York City, he has performed on Broadway and at Gotham Hall for an awards ceremony and gala. In San Diego, he sang for a wedding party made up exclusively of autistic people. He even flew to London to perform in "Autism's Got Talent" in May 2016.

In addition to boosting his self-esteem as he grew older, his father said, singing gave Michael "a place in the world, where he can compete and be as good as anyone else."

Dan, who practices alongside Michael by strumming a guitar, added that it "opens a line of communication." "We share our love of music," he said.

Michael's talents have also garnered recent media attention. "The Employables," a new A&E television show, featuring people with developmental disabilities on quests to find work — including Korins in the fifth episode, which will premiere July 3 on the network's channel.

A majority of adults with autism are unemployed, Ellen said, "but not because they don't have skills or something to offer. It's because of society in general," she said, such as the typical way to apply for a job. Those with autism may struggle in a traditional interview, but they still have "natural talents" to offer.

Still, finding employment proved to be a challenge for Michael. To keep the suspense, however, the Korinses chose to depict the adventure in the episode — which was nearly six months in the making. Aside from cable, it can be found on on-demand services, including Amazon Prime and iTunes.

Korins's next performance, which came a few days after he talked with the Herald, in Sea Cliff, would include a closing Ray Charles cover. "I'm pretty excited to play that one," he said with a smile.

"He's struggled with a lot through his life," Ellen said. "But music was never a struggle. That's his safe place."

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