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Chorus rises to the top

Music: Rhythm of the Rockies win title

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Foothills residents (from left) Maureen Friesen, Arlene Jones and Kathy Helfrick, of the Rhythm of the Rockies Chorus in Calgary, won the world championship in the Sweet Adelines International singing competition earlier this month. The 57-member chorus competed in Honolulu on Nov. 5.

Photo Submitted

Three foothills a cappella singers were left speechless when their choral group was named world champions two weeks ago.

Maureen Friesen, Arlene Jones and Kathy Helfrick let their voices rise with 54 other ladies in the Rhythm of the Rockies Calgary chorus during the Sweet Adelines International singing competition in Hawaii on Nov. 5 and were shocked to learn they placed first.

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“We thought it’s an honour just to go,” said Friesen. “To win was remarkable.”

The group qualified for the international competition after winning a regional singing competition in the harmony classic category for mid-sized singing groups (30 to 60 members) two years ago. This was the first time the 11-year-old chorus qualified for an international competition.

“We knew we really had to bring our game up even higher to go to internationals,” Friesen said. “This is a very competitive group. This is not a group that sits back and does nothing.”

The southern Alberta ladies were up against three United States choruses and one from Ontario, all required to perform two barber shop songs and two others of choice in the Honolulu Convention Centre.

The group performed a package of four songs for its theme about a private investigator looking for a singer she heard in a 1940s jazz club. Dressed in '40s clothing in the decade’s hairstyles, Friesen said the performance was quite unique.

“A lot of them do comedy packages,” she said. “Ours stood out because we did something more out of the ordinary.”

Rhythm of the Rockies was fourth to compete and the ladies were stunned when they were named the champions.

“Several of our coaches were there at the competition and said ‘How were you so surprised?’” she said. “We knew when we coached you you were awesome.”

The chorus was required to perform microphone tests for the larger group competitions as an opening act because they placed first.

Friesen said many members had to reschedule their flights home as they hadn’t expected to win.

Jones went into the competition hoping Rhythm of the Rockies would place in the top three, but she never imagined a win.

“I feel so proud of our chorus and so proud that we, as Canadians, won that first place,” she said. “It makes me want to compete more and continue to grow as an individual singer and to be the best that I can be as a member of the Rhythm and Rockies Chorus.”

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The Heritage Heights resident said the group was well prepared for the competition, bringing in coaches from across the United States and Canada weeks before to perfect their performance.

“Our rehearsal schedule and coaching sessions were plentiful and the expectation of personal growth was definitely there,” she said.

When Jones first watched a rehearsal of the chorus four years ago with Friesen she was instantly hooked.

“The barbershop sound was exciting and I remember being just blown away and thinking I want to do this,” she said. “I loved the style and sound of these women swaying to the music, emoting and singing with such abandon.”

Jones was a choral member in high school and directed the church choir at Okotoks’ Evangelical Free Church and the Holy Trinity Academy school choir for three years and was looking for an opportunity to be part of a singing group again.

“I enjoy being a part of Rhythm because I love to sing and be with others who love to sing,” she said. “The camaraderie of women together is unbeatable. We are friends. We share a passion. I love that.”

Kathy Helfrick, who lives near Spruce Meadows, joined the group six years ago with her sister and two friends and watched the chorus come a long way, particularly the last few months.

“Our group has put in 18 months of hard work since we qualified for this competition,” she said. “We’ve become flexible in our ability to adjust to suggestions and benefit from new skills.”

Helfrick said she can’t believe the chorus was named world champions.

“I’m still amazed at how well we did and that we qualified when the event was in Hawaii,” she said. “Everything that we planned and practiced came together at the right moment. As we came off the stage everyone was feeling that they had done all they could. It was fantastic.”

The chorus has little time to celebrate their new title. The ladies will soon begin preparing for the Sweet Adelines International regional competition in Surrey, B.C. in May.

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“We have new songs to learn and community events in and around Calgary booked for performances,” she said. “We’ll be bringing our energy and a renewed enthusiasm for our art form to all we do.”

To learn more about Rhythm of the Rockies, or to inquire about joining the group, go to www.rhythmoftherockies.org