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Inspiring children through music

By Mike Ryan

Saratoga Today

All marketing aimed at children relies on the same basic principle: grab their attention and get them hooked while they're young.

However, not everyone is trying to push junk food, toys and videogames. Ruth Pelham; founder and executive director of Music Mobile Inc., is using music to inspire kids to make a positive difference in the world.

Based in Albany, Music Mobile Inc. is a non-profit community arts organization that started in 1977 as a six-week experiment. After more than 30 years of bringing folks together through music making, people know Pelham's colorful van, her friendly face and her catchy tunes.

Pelham has presented programs regionally, nationally and internationally at playgrounds, libraries, hospitals, senior centers and schools. She said people now in their 30s and 40s often recognize her and will sing one of her songs.

"Songs have a way of getting in your head and staying there," Pelham said. "I believe it makes a tremendous difference what the words in the songs are."

Frequently working with elementary school students, Pelham estimated she visits between 15 and 20 schools a year. The length of the visits varies. She is just finishing up a four-day stint at Greenfield Elementary School.

In response to Sept. 11, 2001, Pelham created "Room For Us All: A Musical Celebration of Peace and Compassion." She believes her original songs and activities can be adapted to fit an educator's curriculum and



In addition to her work with the Music Mobile, Pelham is also a singer/songwriter and a founding member of the Children's Music Network (CMN). The national organization of teachers, songwriters, radio hosts and parents will hold its 2007 National Conference from Sept. 28-30 in Albany.

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serve as a "peacemaking resource" for teachers, parents and social workers.

Kindergarten and first grade classes at Greenfield have been brainstorming words and images during workshops with Pelham which express their ideas about kindness, generosity and getting along with one another.

"The purpose of the workshops is to give kids the opportunity to put into practice the concepts they learn through character education. Things such as sharing, fairness, cooperation, and respect," she said.

The students will be performing songs from "Room For Us All" in a concert today. Different classes have learned different songs, but all the students will be singing "Love Is All Around" and "Under One Sky." Instruments the kids have built from recycled materials like bottle caps, cans, rain ponchos, macaroni and paint stirrers will add accompanying music to the songs.

"Songs are a powerful vehicle for children to say what's in their minds

and in their hearts," Pelham said.

The Saratoga County Program for Arts Funding (SPAF) made Pelham's visits possible. The New York State Council of the Arts (NYSCA) regrant program appointed the Saratoga County Arts Council to review and award money to various artists and organizations including artist residences in schools.

Pelham hopes to write a book about the methodology she's developed as an educator and create more educational materials such as activity books and recordings. In the next few years, her goal is to start a Music Mobile Institute as a training center, so more people can learn the songs, be taught how to teach in an empowering way and write grants to support the programs. Currently her staff is composed of one full-time person, two part-timers and some volunteers.

For more information, visit www.musicmobile.org.