

Omegas nurture different kind of music idol

BY T. KEVIN WALKER
THE CHRONICLE

A half-century before "American Idol," Omega Psi Phi Fraternity began looking for young, untapped talent in small towns and cities throughout the country.

Sunday the Psi Phi and Mu Epsilon chapters of the fraternity held their annual Talent Hunt at the Anderson Center, providing eight teenagers a stage on which to shine and an audience to entertain.

"We want to give those students with musical talent a chance to expose that," said Emory Jones, chairman of the Talent Hunt Committee. "A lot of times they do not get a venue to show their talents."

The Omegas' Talent Hunt competition began in the mid-1940s in the North and South Carolina districts of the fraternity. These days, Omega rules mandate that every chapter hold a Talent Hunt competition. Local winners, compete at the state level and then have an chance to compete nationally.

The Talent Hunt competition requires contestants to per-

form classical music or Broadway standards. Jones says the fraternity sees the requirement as a way to push that kind of music in a society obsessed with hip-hop. He also says young people who have such talent rarely get a chance to showcase it.

"There are a lot of talent shows, but where else do they get a chance to do that classical and semi-classical?" he said.

Most of the eight contestants gave vocal performances, singing everything from Gershwin's "Summertime," to "My Favorite Things," the Rodgers and Hammerstein classic from "The Sound of Music." The other contestant, Meredith Roberts, a senior at Kerwin Baptist Christian School, performed a dramatic piano solo.

They performed under the watchful eye of a panel of three judges, all of whom are professors in the department of music at Winston-Salem State University. Two of the judges competed in the Talent Hunt competition as teenagers.

Judge Rochelle Joyner, a



Winner Meredith Roberts talks to Emory Jones after winning the Talent Hunt.



Second-place winner Cherri Culclease talks with her father after the competition.

piano instructor, said that judging the competition brought back memories of the day she played piano in the competition.

"It brought back memories of when I was up there," she

said. "So I tried not to be too critical. In my comments I just let them know what they need to work on."

The judges favored Roberts' piano performance over the vocalists to the delight

of Roberts' family. (Her parents, little sister, youth pastor and both sets of her grandparents were on hand to cheer her on.)

"I was not nervous that she would come in first place, but

just nervous that she would do her best," said Lisa Roberts, Meredith's mom, who moved close to the stage during her daughter's performance to capture it with a camcorder.

Meredith Roberts' talent has shined in the competition before. Two years ago she came in second place. Last year, she won the Talent Hunt and went on to Raleigh to compete for the state title. She fell a little short in Raleigh, coming in second place. Roberts will head back to Raleigh in the spring, but she says winning is not foremost in her mind.

"It was a lot of fun last year, and I met a lot of really cool people," she said. "It is very enriching regardless of how you do."

The first runner-up this year was North Forsyth High School senior Cherri Culclease, who performed "My Favorite Things." The second runner-up was Shantel Norman, a senior at Lexington High School. She performed "Impossible," the Rodgers and Hammerstein tune from the musical "Cinderella."

Mendez

from page A1

Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York City; and Ron Daniels, executive director of the Center for Constitutional Rights.

The ministers' petition also urges Hussein and his government to comply with United Nations Resolution 1441 to avoid any "pre-text for a pre-emptive strike that will take the precious lives of Iraqi men, women and children."

"President Saddam Hussein and the Iraqi leadership are now apparently the only persons who can act to spare people of every race, creed and color on this planet the scourge of a war that, in the words of Albert Einstein, 'will send humankind back to the stone ages of our existence,'" reads a portion of the peace petition.

Although the group was unable to meet with the Iraqi president or any of his governmental officials, a copy of the petition was forwarded to them. Mendez said that Fauntroy stayed an additional day after the rest of the delegation returned to the United States with the hopes of meeting with a member of Hussein's cabinet.

Six people were killed in Southern Iraq from U.S. bomb raids over the weekend and several people informed Mendez that this is an everyday occurrence. Sirens, alerting citizens of raids, can be heard on a daily basis, so often that people have become desensitized to the sound and carry on, rarely stopping their tasks.

"Iraq is on the brink of disaster. I'm talking about economically, socially and even politically. It is a country that has not recuperated from the

first (Gulf) war from what I saw. The (U.S. imposed) sanctions are worse than the dog-gone bombing that is still going on. The war never really stopped," Mendez said.

Over the course of the three-day trip, the ministers, who were received very hospitably, visited hospitals, elementary schools, mosques, shelters and churches across Baghdad, Karbala and what was ancient Babylon. The sentiment, Mendez said, was universal everywhere they visited: peace.

Mendez says that after visiting the war torn region, he is convinced now more than ever, that the U.S. government is primarily concerned with controlling Iraq's oil source than with establishing a democracy in the country. He considers any attack on Iraq to be "immoral."

"What (the United States wants) are the resources, and that I am much more clear on than I was even before I left. Why we are after Iraq right now, I think it's three things involved: one is oil, two is Israel and three (the United States wants) to dominate that part of the world...It's getting to be a maddening situation," Mendez said.

Mendez was stunned to see how many youngsters were suffering from leukemia, pneumonia, cancer and various kinds of infections. Many of the doctors have been exposed to toxins in the atmosphere and have difficulty treating their patients with little medical supplies they have.

"The bombs the (United States has) dropped on Iraq contained depleted uranium that gets in the soil and will remain there for years...People that live around it, are exposed to it and develop these cancers...and worse the (U.S.-imposed) sanc-

tions will not allow medicine to come into the country," Mendez said.

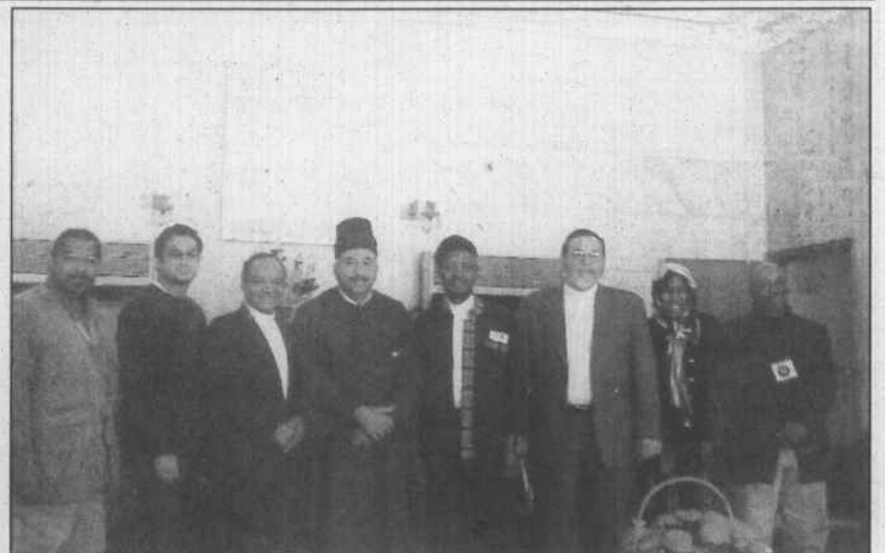
Mendez brought back countless pictures of hospital patients, many of them young. One in particular showed a premature baby in a nine-year-old incubator who was unable to produce sound when he cried. Many patients, Mendez said, were sharing oxygen tanks because not enough were available to go around to each individual.

"It's a disastrous situation and people are just trying to survive from day to day. When you look at those conditions you say this is what's a threat to us?" Mendez said. "Americans really need to be concerned about the (Iraqi) children and women and the future of that (country)."

UNICEF in Iraq provided Mendez with some statistics that revealed that in the last decade, the infant mortality rate has more than doubled to 107 deaths per 1,000 live births. Along with malnutrition, disease is the most immediate cause of mortality and physical underdevelopment of Iraqi children. Most of the children in Iraq are suffering from preventable illnesses like acute respiratory illness, diarrhea and dehydration - all which account for 70 percent of child deaths.

"We encouraged the (Iraqi people) by telling them that all of the Americans are not for this war and that we will protest throughout the world, and they said to us that they don't want war either," Mendez said.

While many Iraqi people



From left: Rev. John Mendez, Dr. Faiz Khan, Shaker Elsayed, Abdul Sabib, Rev. Herbert Daughtry, Rev. James Fitzgerald, Traci West and Edgar White are pictured at a mosque in Karbala, Iraq last week.

did not even utter Saddam Hussein's name when discussing the current situation in their homeland, Mendez says it was evident that they "want Saddam to go, and a lot of them are tired of him."

"I want to have a mock funeral before people are killed as a symbol (of what may happen)," Mendez said. "There's no question that this war is not about Saddam Hussein...You can't export democracy; it's got to come from the people themselves."

After President George Bush's address to the nation last week, many Iraqi citizens were

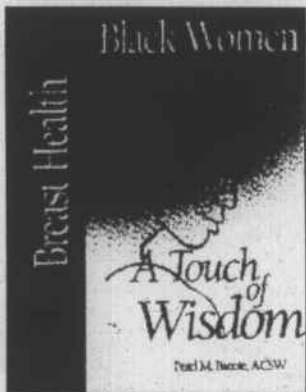
expecting war to ensue last weekend, Mendez said. Mendez and the other ministers were asked to leave the country earli-

er than they planned for fear of their safety.

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