

# VOENA gets treated to Southern hospitality

By Rich Freedman/ 07/13/13, 12:01 AM PDT

These wild, crazy, arm-waving, strange-language speaking, diverse cultured California kids. If they're not careful, why, they might just be invited back to the Crossroads Children's Chorus Festival.

And that makes Annabelle Marie one tickled

choir director.

The week-long trip to Nashville was surely worth it, said the founder and director of VOENA.

With a select group of 13 singers from Napa and Solano counties, the acclaimed a cappella group was one of five children's choirs selected nationally to perform at the Grand Ole Opry House in Nashville.

"We're having fun. I'm working on my southern accent," said Annabelle Marie on Wednesday, awaiting Thursday night's performance of 18 straight songs on the iconic stage in Opryland.

It's all about meeting other choirs, networking, and giving VOENA road experience, Annabelle Marie said.

Some of the 13 from here knew about the challenges of travel, having participated in VOENA's Summer Olympics experience. Some, however, had never been part of a

road trip.

"The biggest thing is learning how to pace yourself and not over-pushing,"

Annabelle Marie said. "Some of these kids over-pushed and stayed up too late, or went swimming too much. There are so many activities in the day, they get to rehearsal and learn the hard lesson. They were exhausted and then they'd have a four-hour rehearsal the next day."

Learning the music is also imperative, Annabelle

Marie added.

"They think once they've arrived, they're done, that they don't have to work outside of rehearsals. They think they're on vacation."

Sure, Annabelle Marie said, there are built-in activities for the young people, "but we are here for a special purpose. We are here to be part of something special that's very professional. You can't perform at the Grand Ole Opry unless it's at a high level. It's stressful that way."

Performing all or part of 18 songs is challenging straight through is challenging, Annabelle Marie said, but important toward each child's maturity.

"That's the kind of seasoning I need for new kids to be able to handle," she said, noting that this experience helps her choose vocalists for future long-distance events.

VOENA included several vocalists younger than 9 and Annabelle Marie was told the festival "never had kids that young."

"And they're really surprised our kids are holding up," she said. "And when the choirs performed for each other, the other groups were blown away. All their choirs are classical and here comes my troupe with my circus background."

The Crossroads festival conductor was so impressed, he wanted to have lunch with Annabelle Marie to discuss her innovative teaching methods.

Just mustard on the burger for Annabelle Marie, happy that the Gaylord Opryland Hotel was a city within a city and all-contained.

"It's so weird," she said. "We were here three days and I never went outside. I didn't know what the weather was."

Perhaps as odd as the glass city was VOENA's wake-up call: Annabelle Marie singing in her best twang, "*Come on you sleepy head, come on get out of bed, here comes the sunnnnn.*"

"One parent hung up on me," she said.