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### Arts & Entertainment: Staten Island's Oscar Winners --- Public School Chorus Goes Hollywood

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Now that the nominees have been announced, Natalie Portman, David Fincher and Hollywood's biggest names have begun counting the days until the 83rd Academy Awards. Perhaps no one is counting harder than the fifth-grade chorus at P.S. 22 in Staten Island, which will be performing at the Feb. 27 ceremony in Los Angeles.

At a recent rehearsal, Gregg Breinberg, the young teacher and choirmaster with slicked-back hair pulled into a ponytail, guided 65 students through an arrangement of Bon Jovi's "Livin' on a Prayer." The group has just five weeks before the biggest performance in its brief history. The song began with soloist Azaria Chamorro, and she missed the first note.

"Start again," Mr. Breinberg said. "Watch your pitch. Do you hear it?"

"Yes," came the reply.

"Good, that's what counts."

For Mr. Breinberg, more important than the Academy Awards or the unexpected YouTube-fueled fame of his students is the chance to inspire a new crop of children to love music -- particularly at a public school where a chorus didn't exist 10 years ago. The Oscars may be an enormous stage, but his vocalists are accustomed to the cameras by now. Their videos, posted by Mr. Breinberg on the popular Web site, have amassed more than 27 million views. The chorus has sung for Beyonce Knowles and Stevie Nicks, and performed at the White House.

Actress Anne Hathaway, who will co-host the Academy Awards, showed up at the P.S. 22 winter concert in December to invite the fifth graders to perform at the Oscars. The screams from parents and students were near-deafening.

"I was screaming loud," said chorus member Aisha Okeowo. "I was really happy because I never thought it would really happen. I wanted to be an actor when I grew up, and I didn't know it was going to be that fast."

When Mr. Breinberg, 38, was hired 12 years ago, following a short stint at a more affluent school, P.S. 22 had no music program and little money. As a second-grade teacher, he used music as a way to teach other subjects.

"I could sing you the synonyms-antonyms song," he said. "The kids that maybe weren't so musical, it didn't matter because they loved music so much. I could teach them that way and it stuck."

When he created the school's music program, Mr. Breinberg focused on strict discipline and rigid posture -- the opposite of the freewheeling energy that has characterized his group on YouTube. "I was exactly what I'm totally against," he recalled.

Now the students dance and move throughout their performances of pop hits by Alicia Keys and obscure indie songs by bands like the Freelance Whales. Mr. Breinberg can hardly sit still for a moment during the hour and 45 minute rehearsal.

"It's an emotional experience, it's a passionate experience," he said. "There is a certain sound that you get by not singing properly, and I look for that sound. That's a sound that I love."

Chorus member Naseem Barnett, 11, whose trip to Los Angeles will be his first on an airplane, credits Mr.

Breinberg with helping "us unlock our potential not only with our voice -- with our personality, with our class work."

As the world around the chorus has exploded with press requests, emails from fans and what amounts to the most glamorous field trip of all time, Mr. Breinberg has been focused on keeping the excitement from interfering with his students.

"These really are kids that come from circumstances that would blow your mind," he said. "But they come to chorus and they find this thing that they do well. They get the validation from me, their school, the press, from artists that they admire. I don't have to tell you what that'll do to a child."

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