

Sue Huff, Edmonton School Board Trustee

Last night, I had the **joy** of attending the Voices of Nature concert at the Citadel Theatre in celebration of the ICLEI World Congress. 350 students sang songs about the environment, sustainability and hope with Holly Arntzen, Kevin Wright and The Dream Band. The participating schools were: Blessed Kateri, Delwood, J.H. Picard, Mount Royal, St. Clements, Virginia Park & Westglen. Each school's choir director taught their choir the songs in advance and artists worked with them for a few hours to get them ready to perform. They had one dress rehearsal on the stage with the band.

The calibre of the artists was impressive (Holly reminded me of Joni Mitchell), the enthusiasm of the kids infectious and the message of the evening powerful. For me, it was a perfect combination of three things I'm passionate about: kids, artists and the environment. My daughter was in the Westglen choir and I think she's still buzzing about the event. Children introduced each song and explained what the songs meant to them. My favourite intro was: "This song makes me feel powerful." What a gift these artists gave to these children!

One of my most distinct memories as a child was singing a song called "*Leave them a Flower*" with a choir of 300 kids. Our voices were a wall of sound and I remember the feeling of being transported by the power of that sound. I felt we could move mountains. I still remember the lyrics, which ironically (but perhaps not coincidentally) were also about the environment: "Leave them a flower, some grass and a hedgerow, a hill and a valley, a view to the sea, these things are not ours to destroy as we want to, a gift given once for eternity...eternity." I think the seed of environmentalism was planted with that song and it has grown with me ever since.

Last night, the kids sang with passion and full voice, backed up by a rockin' 5-piece band. They sang lyrics like: "*We map the deepest ocean, send photographs to Mars, we're so enchanted by how clever we are, why should one baby feel so hungry she cries, saltwater wells in my eyes.*" (Julian Lennon). You could see the connection they felt to the words, to the message. They sang it heart and soul, no doubt inspired by the full and unfettered commitment of Holly and Kevin. Artists do that--- they give over completely and don't worry too much about how it might look to others. Passion is a hard thing to teach, but it can be modeled.

Mayor Steven Mandel introduced the evening by talking about the future belonging to our children and that because of them, we should feel compelled to act on issues of sustainability. He said, if kids tell you it's important, you parents will listen; if I talk, you can think oh it's just some old fart talking (!).

His message was a perfect opening and the final song of the evening reiterated his message. The finale was called "I Am the Future."(Holly Arntzen and Kevin Wright).

The chorus was:

I....I am.

I am the future, I'm the new.

We... we are.

We are the future and we're counting on you.

Thanks to all the fabulous teachers at the participating schools for creating this memorable opportunity for our kids! I have no doubt that it will prove a pivotal moment in many of these kids' lives.