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'Opera by Children' program a success

To the editor:

As Utah Festival Opera celebrates its 15th year, I would like to tell you about a highly successful program called "Opera by Children." It is in its 10th year. Although the State Office of Education was hesitant in the beginning, it has become the number one arts program pushed by the state office throughout Utah.

Since its beginning, at least 25,000 students in Utah have been involved. Last year alone 4,200 students in 17 school districts wrote their own operas, created their own costumes, made up their own melodies, built their own sets and then performed their operas. Some names the children chose for their operas were, "Hank the Cow Dog," "Cats and Dogs Save the Day," "Memory Tree," "Lost in Space" and "Peace."

With the vision of Michael Balam and the creative talent of Susan Ames, "Opera By Children" is now in five states and continues to grow. They now have a staff of 15 music and drama specialists who traveled over 15,000 miles in Utah going into schools to help the teachers and students prepare their operas.

Enough of the details. What has it done for children? Story after story has come from teachers who have used this program. They tell how it has built self esteem, how it has

brought a timid and backward child out of their shell and how they blossomed.

In a news article from San Bernardino, Calif., dated June 12, 2007, it states "Borrowed from Utah project, marks 4th year in San Bernardino School District, 45 district teachers have trekked to Utah for training and 12 more are set to go next month."

Space does not allow telling some of these stories but I'll share just one about a child of immigrant parents who doesn't speak any English. She had throat surgery at age 2 and has spent most of her young life unwilling to speak at all. When her class was to perform their opera she was so frightened that she cried and cried, yet when the class went on stage they took her hand and she went with them and performed with them. She was so happy she couldn't stop smiling. Later during regular class time she came to the teacher with a work book in her hand and said clearly, in English, "Teacher, what is this word?"

I would invite teachers or parents who have seen this type of success with "Opera By Children" to share their stories in a letter to the editor.

Teachers who use this program in their curriculum deserve a lot of credit. It does build self esteem and the ability to work together.

Evan L. Olsen
Young Ward