

NM OATH

Up With People and OATH

Alumnae form performing arts initiative



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For some of us, life-altering adventures unfold with greater force and frequency than for others, often twisting back to unexpectedly re-touch our lives.

In 1982, I travelled with Up With People (UWP), an international singing and dancing troupe. For a full year, hosted by over 80 remarkable host families, I travelled

through the eastern US, Canada, and six countries in Europe. It was exhausting, exhilarating, surreal, and the journey of a lifetime – at times weird, sad, funny or altogether delightful.

Rehearsing as we travelled, our days overflowed with community projects, visits with the elderly and disabled—today touring a chocolate factory, tomorrow a staircase manufacturer. We performed in inner city schools, prisons, famous theatres, embassies, in New York City at the Waldorf Astoria for the United Nations, and later for Pope John Paul II in Vatican Square in Rome. Our first performance was in Carriazo.

In those days, Up With People regularly performed at half-time for the Super Bowl, and until the mid-90s, had five casts of over 140 people each, simultaneously travelling throughout the world. Promotional teams organized host families and secured donated facilities, services, food and transportation for the cast's stay in a given location. Travel and show costs were covered through cast tuition, ticket sales, and promotional items.

Singing backup, I often shared a mic with one of our primary soloists, Luke West of Fayetteville, Arkansas. Just out of high school, our daily lives suddenly integrated the world beyond our own city limits, until today—for us, the world is small.

After a tsunami in Japan, we worry for our friend Yumiko. Unrest in other parts of the world has us scurrying to email news of other friends. Across the globe, the UWP alumnae network weaves lifelong friends together in unique patchwork of cultural celebration.

For 30 years, Luke and I remained friends on sep-

arate paths, marked by obstacles and challenges, leading lives richer for the joys and perils of our journey. I spent a year in Switzerland as assistant dean of a small college. Luke continued to travel after joining the UWP staff as dance captain and vocal coach, and later became a celebrated performer in his own right.

UWP was far away on our horizon when, in late November, (the day before a planned phone call with Luke), a representative of UWP coincidentally contacted NM-OATH, having heard that the New Mexico nonprofit was led by an UWP alumnus. UWP suggested providing a benefit performance for NM-OATH in Ruidoso, and wanted to discuss venues, sponsors, and other contacts.

An UWP show would nicely dovetail with the upcoming Blue Heart Beat Valentines Benefit Dance, as both UWP and NM-OATH share values for human rights, cultural awareness, and international dialogue.

Later, as Luke and I discussed the growing programs of NM-OATH, it became apparent that Luke's expertise as a promotional coordinator and performer might be a good fit in developing the emerging NM-OATH performing arts initiative. Additionally, as a singer/songwriter working in association with Cotton Valley Records, and as a former staff member of UWP, he would be invaluable in paving the way for their upcoming performance. It was decided; he would join the NM-OATH team of activists.

By early December, not only were performances by Luke West sponsored by NM-OATH at the Tree House Café for the Chamber of Commerce's "Business After Hours" and at Cree Meadows Country Club, but other venues and private parties were being booked.

With a smoky blend of Americana and country blues, Luke is a quick favorite to those who have heard his music. When the exploratory promotion team of UWP visited Ruidoso a week after Luke's arrival, we showed them around the town and facilitated meetings at the Spencer Theater and other venues.

On the surface, the visit of UWP seemed a blessing, though the new UWP weekly fee of \$19,000 stopped us in our tracks. NM-OATH works hard to secure funds for rent and incidentals, and operates without a personnel budget. If NM-OATH could uncover such a sum, it would be critical to apply it to our own operations rather than to give it to UWP with the expectation of only a smaller percentage in return. The



Performer Luke West to develop arts initiative for NM-OATH.

new model of UWP was immediately outside the realm of possibility for a small organization like NM-OATH to bring to town, though the Village of Ruidoso, quickly stepped in as sponsor.

While NM-OATH will provide office space for the UWP team during their month-long promotion efforts, any chance that NM-OATH will be the beneficiary of the proceeds from the show, now rests completely at the discretion of the Village of Ruidoso. As alumnae of UWP, Luke and I employ the old community service model of UWP every day, drawing from our promotional and production experience as we consider other performing arts projects that have recently emerged for NM-OATH.

The Albuquerque Public Academy of Performing Arts seeks to produce a play on human trafficking; NM-OATH members in Santa Fe work to secure a venue for Body and Sold which was performed here last October; and work is well underway for the Blue Heart Beat Valentines Ball featuring the Graham Brothers Band, along with Luke West, on Tuesday, Feb. 14 at the Hubbard Museum. Statewide, the opportunities for Luke West performances have already begun to emerge.

Most importantly, while UWP moves forward on its own journey, as two former UWP cast members, Luke and I have found a common path in raising public awareness about modern day slavery through the performing arts. We've come full circle, for UWP has once again brought us together, ready to weave our experiences into a new and unexpected adventure – this time, as advocates for victims of human trafficking. Dr. Travis is executive director of New Mexico Organized Against Trafficking Humans. 575-630-0015