

Get ready to dance

By Cyndi Lieske | Livingston Life

With a high-energy show bringing them to more than 80 venues a year, the 30 high school students known as the Saline Fiddlers are sure to provide a toe-tapping, hand-clapping good time during their July 10 appearance at the Historic Livingston County Courthouse amphitheater in Howell.

The 7 p.m. show will be their first back in the United States after a 12-day tour of Germany and is part of the summer concert series at the courthouse sponsored by the Livingston Arts Council.

"The Germany trip came about two years ago when our sister city invited us," said Mark Visovatti, booking and administrative manager. "The trip is about an \$80,000 effort. That money was raised through the generosity of people who know about us. The fact that we have achieved our goal should tell you about our group. The people in our community perceive this group as a community treasure."

Only open to high school students in the Saline High School District, each of the group's musicians must face a highly competitive audition process and pay



The Saline Fiddlers will be performing July 10 in downtown Howell.

\$2,000 tuition. Once in the group, they must maintain their grades and agree to a rigorous performance schedule. Since its beginning in 1994, the group has performed more than 1,000 shows.

"We've become a \$250,000 a year enterprise," Visovatti said. "These kids have been to California, they have done a Hurricane Katrina relief tour, and they've been to Florida. They've been to the White House three times and the Kennedy Center twice."

Visovatti's son, Jacob, performed with the group for four years and now has

earned a scholarship to Ball State University, where he will have a double major of music education and music performance. The students work with an artistic director, a dance coach and a vocal coach.

"They rehearse three hours every week on Sunday," he said.

Event Manager Doug Rhine, whose son, David, and daughter, Kathryn, performed with the group, said the Fiddlers' dedication and musicianship has gained them many new fans with each performance.

"I think what is fun for the kids is that they almost know they can surprise an audience by how good they are," Rhine said. "They have achieved a level that surprises people."

When the group first started, they played many old fiddle tunes.

"What they have done over the years is that they have taken the fiddling technique and applied it to a wider range of tunes," he said. "They can do modern stuff or jazz or many other genres. Somebody said the sound is like bluegrass on steroids."

Fiddles are not the only instruments being played, Rhine noted. The group is actually an orchestra with violas, cellos, guitars, bass guitar, banjo, mandolin and drums. Some of the musicians also clog dance. The performers sing for some of the songs, as well.

"For one or two numbers everybody sings," he said. "Then we have some soloists or small groups. We look around the group for good voices and feature them when we can."

Each of the songs performed is specially arranged for the Fiddlers, Rhine explained.

"With a group like this there is no prepared music you can go out and buy," he said.

Many parents pitch in to help.

"There's an army of parent volunteers that help make it all work," he said. "The reason they are so willing to work is that they see what a great program it is for the kids."



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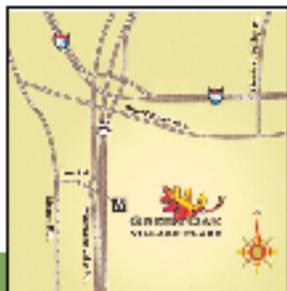
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