

RAISING THEIR VOICES



KAREN PIKE RIESNER, Free Press

Essex Children's Choir members tune up for an appearance Saturday on Garrison Keillor's national radio show from Burlington.

Essex youth choir will sing with Keillor

By Amy Killinger
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Just before its debut on national airwaves with Garrison Keillor's American Radio Company, it was practice as usual for the Essex Children's Choir.

The community choir spent half its two-hour rehearsal Tuesday running through vocal exercises. Director Constance Price, a music teacher at Essex Middle School, sang out strings of notes that were echoed by the choir.

Erica Donniss, an Essex Junction High School senior and the choir's oldest member, said she was excited about its first national appearance.

The youngest member, J.R. Hofman, a fourth-grader at Champlain Elementary School, plans to wear red socks in honor of the occasion. Keillor

always wears red socks on the show.

The choir was selected along with singer Dick McCormack, the Vermont Harmony choir and members of Oriana Singers, to perform during the program's three weeks in Vermont. Price sent a tape to Keillor's producers this fall and found out several weeks ago that the choir had been chosen.

She won't know until Saturday's rehearsal, though, what the group will sing. That's when Keillor and his producers set the night's program.

Keillor can pick from folk, French and classical carols on which the choir has worked. Tuesday, the singers practiced their pronunciation in a North American Indian hymn, " 'Twas the Moon of Wintertime."

The choir was started in 1985 by music students who had been in Price's

choir at Essex Middle School. With backing from the Essex Town Recreation Department, Price organized a choir that would be challenging.

The choir has performed an annual concert on Twelfth Night at St. John Vianney Church in South Burlington and has performed with the Vermont Symphony Orchestra and at a national music conference in Baltimore. In 1993, it will perform at the International Children's Festival in Denmark.

All but one of the 30 singers, ages 7 to 16, come from Chittenden County. No auditions are held, but new members must spend one to two years in training. That is why only 15 of the singers perform.

"Everyone has a good voice," Price said. "They just have to be trained to sing."