

# At-risk, special-needs kids seize the chance to share their dreams

## Harvest Gathering fest helps youths celebrate their talent

By MEHUL SRIVASTAVA

msrivastava@DaytonDailyNews.com

**DAYTON** — The backyard of Lisa O'Hearn's house was filled Saturday afternoon with nearly 30 of the happiest kids in the city.

Folks walking past the nondescript house on Patterson Road heard bluegrass music, the muted buzz of nearly 7,000 bees in a glass case, and the beautiful voices of children singing.

In the backyard — a magical place tough to describe — at-risk children from the East End Youth Center met up with special-needs children from the True Faces of Talent to celebrate a poignant fact: Despite the challenges they face, they have not just talent and dreams, but also opportunities.

And so Alexus Washington, 10, sang a Disney song, following it up with *Girl Power* from the Cheetah Girls; Stephanie Bird did a quick Britney Spears number; and 6-year-old twins Micah and Makaylah Cullen sang *He's Still Working On Me*.

"It's true, you know," said Kobi Cooper, who runs True Faces of Talent, "God isn't finished with these children yet. His blessings are going to keep coming."

It's a tough lesson to teach the children.

Only rarely do at-risk or special-needs children get a chance to have their talents explored, encouraged and celebrated.

But as part of the Harvest Gathering Festival that brought them to O'Hearn's back yard, that's exactly what Saturday afternoon was all about.

The afternoon was meant to be educational as well as fun. Steve Reynolds and his 17-year-old son, Tim, put up a living-history display, with their tent, their pre-1830s rifles and Tim's impressive display of hatchet throwing.

John Rowley showed the children how honey is collected, and O'Hearn, dressed in her American Indian outfit (she's 1/16 Cherokee Wolf Clan), talked about the Underground Railroad and quilts with symbols designed to aid slaves escaping north.

Before the afternoon turned to evening, there was a special treat — Essa Gombert, 19, took the microphone and belted out Lee Greenwood's *God Bless the USA*.

Born with what her father described as developmental delay, she's been singing since she was 3.

Her talent was obvious, even more so when her rendition of *The Star Spangled Banner* brought everybody to their feet, and at least two in the group to tears.

"I love this," she said. "It shows people that kids with disabilities can also have talent."

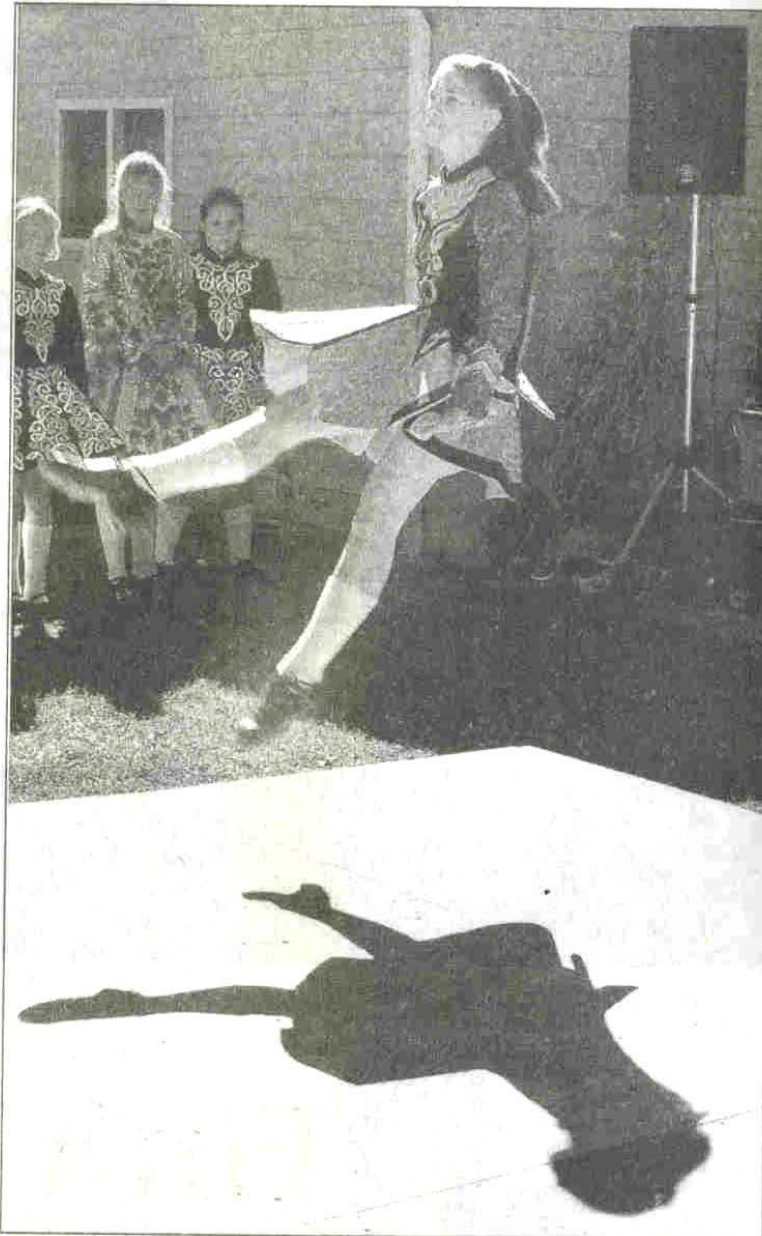
She has sung in front of audiences before, most memorably with the choir of Stivers School for the Arts at the Schuster Performing Arts Center.

"But I don't think that if she hadn't been given the opportunities to perform, she would be as confident as she is right now," said Cooper, who had helped Essa in True Faces of Talent.

The program was brought together by O'Hearn, who runs a nonprofit called Inspire, Create and Unite, or ICU.

Cobbled together with her life savings, and almost six years of effort, the program is run out of her house.

She is making grant applications, hoping to expand the pro-



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**CELTIC DANCER** Kayla Souve, 14, demonstrates a dance at the festival.

gram, and do events like this more often.

"It's all up to God," she said.

For the children from the East End Youth Center, it was an opportunity to "make relationships and be part of something really positive," said Amy E. Jones, the center's program manager. "What

is most important is that they get a sense of community and sense of history that they can't get elsewhere."

They got all that, and more — bluegrass music, kazoos and blueberry pie. A fun afternoon.

Contact Mehul Srivastava at 225-2432.