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## **‘Singing principal’ commands attention**

Latanya Farrell brings energy, joy and talent to school and stages



Stafford Elementary School principal Latanya Farrell brings her singing everywhere — to morning announcements, to the hallways and to stages across Greater Hartford. Candace Jeffery Photography

## BY PAM MCLOUGHLIN HARTFORD COURANT

When a student at Stafford Elementary School in Bristol accomplishes something special, they're likely to be serenaded in the hallway with a soulful rendition of the Alicia Keys hit that affirms, "This girl (or guy) is on fire, This girl (or guy) is on fire."

The students always smile and sometimes they even sing back to the performer — school principal Latanya Farrell.

Farrell, a professional singer who graces outdoor stages and indoor venues throughout Greater Hartford, is known as "the singing principal." She brings her singing everywhere in the school — to morning announcements, to lunch, to the hallways. They even dance.

"We sing a lot; we dance a lot," Farrell said. "I think it just brings positive energy and joy."

She trades her daytime suits and dresses for shiny, glittery and skimpier — yet respectful — attire that showcases an adored tattoo across her shoulder blades. The tattoo is of hearts, a G clef, a peace sign, a ladybug and an apple.

Fans say Farrell not only brings the same clear, strong, soulful voice to the stage as she does to the school, but also the gifts that serve her well as an educational leader — energy, joy, positivity and the ability to command the crowd.

"She's a very talented performing artist and full of expression. She connects with the audience almost immediately," said Tom Faniel, a retired Meriden principal, now a leadership coach for new principals. Farrell was among his coachees. She became principal at Stafford in 2020.

Faniel, who also sang professionally while he was a principal, said because of Farrell's style, "The kids don't feel afraid to express themselves — which is what you want.

"The kids love her because she's always aspiring. She's true to her values — to be kind, respectful and true to yourself."

Farrell's mother told her she has been singing since she was a baby. Though Farrell doesn't remember that, she does recall listening "over and over" to her parents' 45 records and eight-track tapes.

"Music has always been a part of me — in me, around me," Farrell said.

It wasn't until around seventh grade that Farrell began singing formally in church, and then continued in high school in choir and madrigals.

She mostly took a break in college — a national anthem here and there — because her focus was on earning a teaching degree and planning for a family.

"I love, love, love learning," she said. "I think I'm a super curious person who loves to laugh. The thought of being in a school really made me happy."

She returned to singing in a big way after being named champion of the 2003 Connecticut Star Search competition.

Farrell, who lives in West Hartford, made the audition tape for the contest at the last minute after the relentless urging of her hairdresser, who heard Farrell's impromptu singing in the salon. At the time, Farrell was juggling her son, Jason, a toddler who now 21, and daughter, Jordan, an infant who is now 19.

"I thought, 'Let me just try this,' " she said. She sang Mariah Carey's "Hero." She made it to the finals, and she won.

WFSB meteorologist Scot Haney, who oversaw the contest and has remained friends with Farrell — even reading to kids at Stafford — recalls that Farrell was holding her infant daughter in the tape.

"As soon as I saw the video I said, 'We have a winner,' " Haney said. He has watched her perform often since, and she's joined him onstage for a Christmas show.

Farrell, who taught elementary, middle and high school before becoming an administrator, said she's always loved kids.

Music has always been in her education mix, whether a "jazzy" version of the ABC song in a kindergarten class or the upbeat and affirming, "You Are My Sunshine."

“I’d sing for my students all the time. I can’t help it,” she said. “I would just burst out in song.”

During morning announcements, Farrell sings “Happy Birthday” if there are any birthdays among students or staff and, if not, her own version of “You Are My Sunshine,” with some lyrics tailored to Stafford’s mission.

She even asks students what style they want the songs in — jazzy, hip-hop, country, R&B or some other genre.

“If kids are having a meltdown, she’ll dance and sing with them to get them centered,” said the school’s head secretary, Nicole Mason. “If she sees a kid in the hall and knows he has a favorite song, she will start singing to them.”

Mason said her boss has the “patience of a saint” and is so remarkably high energy that she even hula hoops.

The music at the school is a bonus, parents of children at Stafford say, because Farrell has so many other great qualities as a principal.

She’s caring, communicative, patient, kind, quick to give a reassuring hug and puts all 365 of her kids first, they said.

“The school couldn’t have a better person as principal. ... She’s absolutely wonderful,” said parent Gabrielle Mulcunry.

“She communicates with the parents. She communicates with the children. It’s the highlight of their day if they see her. She lights up their world.”

Parent Sara Jones said she’s gone through 21 years at Stafford, and Farrell is “best principal we have ever had.”

“When you bring her a problem, she resolves it quickly,” Jones said. “As soon as you walk into the school, you can feel the positive energy that she brings. Principal Farrell uses music to reach the kids’ soul, to give them something fun to look forward to.”

In her performances, Farrell blends her original music with popular cover tunes and packs a crowd and the dance floor. Her website states that her vocal talent and style have been influenced by Whitney Houston, Natalie Cole, Alicia Keys, Aretha Franklin, Mariah Carey and Jill Scott.

Farrell has a regular gig every third Thursday at The Russell restaurant in West Hartford and lots of outdoor summer concerts, private parties and fundraisers. On Wednesday, she will perform in Elizabeth Park in West Hartford at 6:30 p.m. on the John G. Martin Foundation Stage.

Farrell said she’s in a good spiritual place.

“I’ve seen a lot of pain and hurt at a young age into adulthood. ... I feel my life is really aligned now. My path is so clear,” she said.