

Stand Strong: Teen Songwriters in Frederick Create Tribute to Essential Workers

Fiona McKee



“Stand strong for our heroes who risk everything. . .”

As I stand in front of the microphone singing the lyrics to this song, elation fills my voice and bubbles over into the words I’m singing. I’m finally hearing months of hard work pay off as I listen to this song that I helped write.

Nothing will stop us. Not even coronavirus.

This March, everything was normal. I was busy preparing for my robotics competition, which would be happening over the weekend, and thinking about meeting my friends the next week. I was especially looking forward to the awards concert for the **STEP UP!** Frederick Student Songwriting Contest produced by Chords of Courage. I had placed as a finalist, which meant my song would be performed live at the concert. That was also where I would find out what place I had gotten. I was really looking forward to it.

“NOTHING WILL STOP US. NOT EVEN CORONAVIRUS.”

Then everything changed. Events were cancelled or postponed indefinitely. A quarantine was put into place, with everyone being asked to stay home. All of this because of COVID-19.

Coronavirus was threatening the world, but life had to go on. Events started going virtual, while others were postponed. The awards concert was among the latter, and suddenly no one knew when it would be happening. As a result of the sudden confusion, Caron Dale, the founder of Chords of Courage, hosted a Zoom meeting for all those who had placed in the contest.

That’s how everything started.

On the call, Caron Dale mentioned an idea she had. What if we were to write a song together?

None of us knew each other. We were aspiring songwriters and had all been recognized by the contest for our songwriting skills. Some of us were high schoolers, and some of us were middle schoolers. Some of us went to public school, while others were homeschooled. All of us writing a song together would be a challenge. It also felt like an opportunity.

When we got together on the next Zoom meeting and began to lay out the specifics of what we would have to do, writing a song felt even more daunting. We all had different levels of experience and just as wide a range of musical styles. We had no song subject, no idea what rhythm or feeling we wanted to create. I'd never collaborated with anyone to write lyrics, let alone an entire song. We were starting completely from scratch.

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Nevertheless, we dove headfirst into the task. Twice a week, we would meet over Zoom to plan and brainstorm and share ideas. Often, we would write out some lyrics, only to toss the idea

and start over again with a blank slate. The theme of our song became clear as the lines took shape. We chose to focus our lyrics on the efforts of essential workers during this pandemic. As time went on, the challenges of writing a song increased, and the number of names on the Zoom screen began to decrease. Perhaps people no longer had the time, or maybe they weren't prepared to commit themselves to the task. In the end, the names dropped to five: Audrey Cowles, Gabriela Cuddy, Caron Dale, Isabella Marchena, and myself.

Several weeks went by, and after numerous sessions of hard work, we finished the lyrics. I was surprised at our progress. Four teenage songwriters, who had never met, had come together over Zoom to create a set of powerful, moving words for a song. But we didn't have a melody to sing the lyrics to.

Writing the music was just as much of a challenge. Each of us had a different style. Some days, the ideas we tried out sounded like pop music, and other times it was closer to country music. We ended up taking a little of each person's ideas and mixing them together into a musical style that combines several genres.

That was when Caron Dale announced that our song would be sent to a professional studio, Torchlight Productions, who would produce and record our song. What was more, we were being given the opportunity to record some of the vocals and instrumentals. This was an amazing opportunity, but also a terrifying one. I'd never been in a professional studio. What would it look like inside? How did the recording process go? And the biggest question of all: Would I sing well enough for the recording?

Over the next week, the four of us went to the studio individually and recorded our parts in a safe, socially distanced manner. In addition, Isabella Marchena composed and played a violin melody that was added to the opening of the song.

The experience wasn't nearly as scary as I had anticipated. My initial nervousness faded away after I started singing, and I ended up enjoying myself. Watching professionals at work as they mixed the song and hearing the result being played in a room with exceptional acoustics made my day.

We just needed one more thing: visuals to accompany the music. Steve Pendlebury, a local videographer, created a video to match our music and reiterate the thank-you we were sending to essential workers. Writing about essential workers during COVID-19 also inspired us to help our local community, and we partnered with the Asian American Center of Frederick to donate food to those in need.

“Stand strong for our heroes who risk everything. Day in and day out, it's their all that they bring...”

When we received the finished version of the song from the studio, Caron Dale played it back for us during one of our Zoom meetings. As I listened, I thought back to the beginning of this long journey we'd gone down. Quarantine hadn't been boring, not with this experience. When we'd started writing the song, we hadn't known each other at all. But now, we were friends who would never have met if not for coronavirus.

COVID-19 has turned our worlds upside down, but these new challenges are just opportunities for us to grow and support each other in this new reality. Our song, “Stand Strong,” proves that.

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