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For over 60 years, the Kiwanis Hi-Liters entertained with musical performances put on by students at a variety of venues, including senior centers and long-term care facilities in Meriden, Wallingford and Southington. But the program, sponsored by the Kiwanis Club of Meriden since 1968, is no more.

In 1952, 16-year-old Richard Fontanella started the Hi-Liters with several students at Meriden High School. Fontanella successfully continued the show for 61 years. In 2013, the group held its last show. At that time, it was unclear if the Hi-Liters would continue.



Richard Fontanella, who founded the Hi-Liters in 1952, was inducted into the Meriden Hall of Fame in 2006. | File photo / Record-Journal

On Friday, Kevin Santoni, who took over direction of the Hi-Liters earlier this month, announced the group is disbanding. Fontanella, 78, recently retired, he said. "At the request of Richard's family, we're closing it up for good," Santoni said. "This was the best decision to commemorate his accomplishments."

For the past several years, Santoni has been working with the Hi-Liters providing audio and technical expertise. He also used to live next door to Fontanella, and knows his family well. Santoni said he wants to get the word out that Fontanella has retired and that Hi-Liters won't continue.

Dave Elkin, former president of the Kiwanis Club of Meriden, was liaison to the Hi-Liters for over 30 years. Elkin said Fontanella is now living in a long-term care facility. Fontanella has been honored on numerous occasions for his work with the Hi-Liters, Elkin said, and his room is "covered with plaques and certificates." "Richard wanted to do something that would impact kids and the elderly," he said. "He was just wonderful with the kids."

Regarding the end of the Hi-Liters, Elkin said, "It's very sad." "It was getting hard to get kids to join," he said. "Today's kids are so much more involved with other school activities. But the Hi-Liters shouldn't be forgotten in the history of Meriden."

After Fontanella graduated from Meriden High School, he expanded the group. Besides a two-year hiatus in 1959-1961 while Fontanella served in the U.S. Army, the Hi-Liters flourished. All the while, Fontanella worked at Northeast Utilities for 35 years. In 1961, he founded a ballroom dancing class. He was also active in Meriden Community Theatre. After his retirement, Fontanella spent 10 years working at King Travel.

In 2006, Fontanella was inducted into the Meriden Hall of Fame. “It is something I thought would never happen to me,” Fontanella said of the achievement at the time. “When I look back, I can’t believe that I have touched so many lives. I did something I loved and something I had a lot of fun with.”

The Midstate Chamber of Commerce honored Fontanella with the Community Partnership Award in 2013. “We try to bring happiness to the people who are stuck in nursing homes all day long,” Fontanella said after receiving the award. “You’d be surprised how these kids turn these people’s faces into smiles. To get an award for something I just wanted to do – I didn’t expect that.”

At the time, Fontanella said he’d seen about 300 children join Hi-Liters. Several children stick around as adults, as advisers; some have gone on to Broadway, he said. The Hi-Liters performed up to 20 concerts annually in the region. Each original performance, written by Fontanella, was about two hours. Fontanella wrote each show in the summer, Elkin said. In the fall, he would get kids together and begin rehearsing on Monday nights. From January through May, the group would perform every Monday night, he said.

“They didn’t miss a trick,” Elkin said. “And the residents at the facilities, they looked forward to it. You would see them out there, some people not really in good shape, tapping their feet and hands. It was a service that was above and beyond what anyone could do.”

It was Fontanella’s show, Elkin said. “I called them Richard Fontanella’s Kiwanis Hi-Liters.” “This was his thing, and he always gave the kids a nice banquet at the end,” he said.

According to the Hi-Liters website, the Kiwanis Club funded the group with about \$800 annually. The funding was used to purchase costumes and hold the annual banquet. Santoni and Elkin said the Kiwanis Club is working on an initiative to help commemorate Fontanella’s legacy.

In 2014, Fontanella was the recipient of the Meriden Lions Club Citizen of the Year Award. In the past, he’s been named the Jaycees’ Man of the Year. Meriden Kiwanis honored Fontanella as a lifetime member. His service has been recognized by the state legislature, and he received the Connecticut Treasure Award in 1999. The City Council recognized Fontanella in 2002 for 50 years of service to the youth of Meriden.

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