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Apr. 25, 2005. 01:00 AM

# Choir's singing to save Steinbeck

## Students at rally to fund libraries in author's home

### Salinas, Calif., planned to close its three branches

ISABEL TEOTONIO  
STAFF REPORTER

Giovanni Spanu is hoping to see for himself if the region of Salinas, California, really is dotted with "pastures of heaven" as John Steinbeck described in his writings.

But what the 17-year-old from Toronto's St. Michael's Choir School wants even more is to ensure those in Salinas always have the pleasure and the right to read books by native son and Nobel Laureate Steinbeck. And, of course, other authors as well.

That's why the internationally renowned 110-boy choral ensemble will perform two benefit concerts in the region this week to help save the public libraries of Salinas from closing after a cash-strapped city council voted in December to shut all three branches.

Net proceeds from the combined concerts, scheduled for Thursday and Friday, will go to "Rally Salinas," recently organized by the mayor as a sort of stay of execution.

The plan is to raise \$500,000 (U.S.) to keep the John Steinbeck Library,

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the Gabilan Library and the Cesar Chavez Library — the latter named after an Hispanic civil rights and labour leader — open twice a week until a permanent solution is found. While they've been called "Canada's singing ambassadors" for their performances in front of the late Pope John Paul II, the Queen of England and the U.S. Congress, Spanu says these upcoming concerts are especially important.

After all, the young diplomats are raising their voices to keep this relatively poor farming community of 150,000 from earning the infamous distinction of being the nation's largest city without a public library.

"It really means a lot to us to do something that's helping others rather than just giving a good concert," Spanu said during a recent interview before heading off for choral practice in the school's auditorium. "This has deeper meaning.... We realize how fortunate we are to be able to help others."

It was a sentiment echoed by choral director Brian Rae before the choir left last week on its spring tour, which included stops in Alberta and British Columbia before their arrival today in California.

"We are doing something special, this is not just another concert," he said, adding it seemed only fitting for them as a school to express their solidarity.

The idea to include the city on its spring tour came from Dennis Donohue, a Salinas resident who visits Toronto often on business as the president of European Vegetable Specialties. (Seems that Salinas, which is known as the Salad Bowl to the Nation because of its vast lettuce and broccoli fields, is also largely responsible for filling the salad bowls of Toronto.)

Donohue first became a fan of the choir years ago when he heard the boys sing during mass at St. Michael's Cathedral in Toronto. But it was only last fall when he got around to approaching Rae about getting the choir to perform in Salinas.

The choir trip to Salinas was already planned when its residents rejected a ballot measure that would've provided new taxes to keep the libraries running. Facing record deficits, city council said it had no option but to make the notorious decision.

While there have been other library funding cutbacks in the U.S., most notably in Detroit and Bedford, Tex., the irony that this would occur in the hometown of Steinbeck has not been lost on anyone, as was evidenced in various newspaper editorials around the world.

"We've become a poster child for this issue," said Donohue, who's also chair-elect of Salinas Valley Chamber of Commerce.

"This is ground zero stuff for the ultimate decline of western civilization. What does it say about communities when we don't have sufficient funds

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to maintain basic institutions?

"The reality is that Salinas has caught a lot of visibility, but it's a conversation that a lot of communities are going to be forced to have in our country because more and more it's getting very difficult to maintain funding for these kinds of services."

It's a conversation Spanu hopes will never take place in his community.

"The fact that we have libraries at our disposal is really important. It introduces you to new writers and things that people might not tell you about it."

He knows. That's where he met Steinbeck.

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