

No Simon, but Saratoga Idol features plenty of talent

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How would American Idol personality Simon Cowell judge the Saratoga Rotary Club's local version of the smash-hit talent show?

"It's just awful," he might say.

Although a go-to line for the controversial celebrity, that answer would be an unlikely reaction after seeing the love that those living in Santa Clara County have for the show.

"It's fantastic!" would be a much more probable response.

The Saratoga Rotary Club's "Saratoga Idol" contest has grown from a clever marketing idea four years ago to become one of the most popular attractions at the club's annual art show.

The local talent show has been embraced by young and old alike, even without the cruel and blunt negative criticisms of a Cowell-type judge.

Although the audience for "Saratoga Idol" comprises people of all ages, the yearly audition attracts just the youth. Last year the average age of the finalists was 16.

But the show's organizers hope that will change with the addition of new sponsor The Forum, a retirement community in Cupertino.

The Forum is covering the prize money—\$1,000 for a first-place finish, \$500 for second place and \$250 for third place—and is hosting the April 17 audition at its facility, located at 23500 Cristo Rey Drive.

"I would love it if there were a 94-year-old winner," said Debby Rice, marketing director and creator of "Saratoga Idol." She hopes some of the retirement community's residents will audition, which would add a new element to the event.

The auditions attract approximately 100 applicants a year, Rice said, with some coming from as far away as Napa County and Los Angeles.

"It's amazing how many talented people are out there," she said.

Whether any of The Forum residents apply for Idol is still in question—what is known, though, is that one of them will be judging the talent out on the stage.

Resident Alan Dale, 86, who has been in a number of nationally televised commercials and has done pledge breaks for PBS, will have a hand in naming this year's "Idol" winner.

He has indicated that he's willing to be the type of judge that the organizers ask him to be.

"I'm not sure if they're looking for a Simon Cowell or a judge [that critiques performances] without going into why it's good or not so good," he said.

"I'm not an expert judge," he added. "I hope I don't disappoint anyone when I say that. I'll have to judge something on whether I like it and if it's done well. If so, then I'll give it high marks."

Dale began his career in entertainment in 1980 when he took classes at Foothill College in an effort to become the school's disc jockey. He eventually did, and that experience helped his career. He went on to do commercials for a variety of companies, including Country Time Lemonade, AT&T and Merrill Lynch.

Even with those years of experience, Dale said, he still has no idea how the experience of being a judge will feel.

"I just don't know," he said. "I guess we'll see when we get there."

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