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What a school assembly: Larkin High students get free concert, recording studio donation

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Larkin High School students in the front row get excited Monday during a free musical festival as part of the High School Nation Tour performance at their school in Elgin.



Sofi K takes the stage Monday during the High School Nation Tour performance at Larkin High School in Elgin. Larkin is among five suburban high schools where concerts will be held this week and one of 40 stops on the national tour this fall.



A student stands on someone's shoulders for a better view of Almost Monday onstage at Larkin High School in Elgin during a free musical festival Monday.



Junior Milagros Garcia and her fellow Larkin High School students enjoy a free concert organized by High School Nation at the Elgin school Monday. The concert took place near the baseball and softball fields.



Almost Monday performs Monday during the High School Nation Tour stop at Larkin High School in Elgin.



A student trying to stand on someone's shoulders goes down in the crowd Monday the High School Nation Tour performance at Larkin High School in Elgin.



Larkin High School students erupt as the first artist takes the stage Monday during a free musical festival organized by High School Nation. Larkin is among 40 high schools nationwide the tour will hit this fall.

For two hours Monday, the baseball field at Larkin High School in Elgin was transformed into a live-music concert venue as a homecoming week treat.

What began as an ordinary school day for the roughly 2,100 Larkin students ended with them dancing and singing along to professional artists performing at a free musical festival.

"It's pretty cool that our school is able to do this," 14-year-old Kelly Stoffle said over the din of high-pitched screams as Detroit-based artist Sofi K performed her latest single. Enjoying the vibrant atmosphere with friends was the highlight of the Larkin freshman's first concert experience.

It was the first stop in a weeklong [High School Nation Tour](#), including four other suburban high schools, aimed at supporting creative expression among teens through musical festivals and programming support. The group will visit 40 high schools nationwide this fall.

Each school also will receive a donation package, including professional recording equipment worth \$20,000, to enhance their music programs.

Larkin will receive new drum kits, guitars, recording software, computer microphones and cabling.

"It's basically everything needed for the school to create their own recording studio on campus," said Jimmy Cantillon, High School Nation founder.

Elgin Area School District U-46 officials have been talking about creating a recording studio at Larkin as part of the school's Visual and Performing Arts Academy magnet program since the district began exploring new career pathways options, Principal Jamie Crosen said.

Once the equipment arrives, it will be set up in an underused room next to the school's Black Box Theater.

"It's a perfect space for a recording studio," Crosen said, adding that it likely will be set up by the end of the quarter.

The musical festival offered students eye-opening perspectives about careers in the music and arts industry, Crosen said.

Students were involved in question-and-answer sessions with the performers. They also were allowed to help set up the stage and sound for the event.

"A lot of the kids got to see what goes into setting up for a real concert. They could also see some of the behind-the-scenes operations that happen," Crosen said. "Resources are tight. For some of our kids, they don't go to concerts like this. It was just a great learning experience that our kids should have."

Australian pop artist Emily Perry, San Diego-based alternative pop rock band Almost Monday, up-and-coming artist Royse, singer-songwriter Micah Blu and alternative rock singer-songwriter Natalie Claro performed Monday. Concert headliner Silentó, whose 2015 chart-topping single "Watch Me (Whip/Nae Nae)" became a viral sensation, was unable to make the Larkin concert but is expected to perform this week at the other suburban high schools.

Dance choreographer and professional dancer Liz LeGrande taught students dance moves they later performed on stage.

"I use dance as a way to help these kids transform their fear into courage," said LeGrande, who has performed with top artists including Usher, Beyoncé, Katy Perry and Iggy Azalea. "I love the transformation that dance can bring. I think more schools need it."

High School Nation's free concerts and music equipment donations are supported by sponsors -- Hollister Co., a division of Abercrombie & Fitch Co., Takis chips company, Guitar Center, OWC (Other World Computing), and the Truth Initiative teen anti-tobacco movement.

Cantillon, who previously worked in the music industry, and his five brothers started the organization to support music and arts education in public high schools having grown up poor in wealthy Santa Barbara, California. Started in 2012 with five high schools in Southern California, it has grown to 80 schools overall this school year, Cantillon said.

Last fall, the group organized music festivals for Chicago Public Schools' high schools for the first time and later were approached by suburban districts.

"The awesome thing is people really want to support kids. They want to support schools. We've just been a vehicle to make that happen," Cantillon said.