

Family tunes its future to a bluegrass note

SOUND OF MUSIC: Dad, mom and 7 kids leave Palmer to tour nationally.

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PALMER -- Six months after moving into their brand new house in Palmer, the Walker family moved out.

"It was going to be our dream house until we got a bigger dream," said Brett Walker, who with his wife, Apryll, heads a family of nine.

Their band, the RedHead Express, which for a year made the musical rounds at local fairs, coffee shops and senior centers, was going pro years ahead of the schedule Brett had in mind.

Life was too short to wait on following a dream, he and Apryll decided last year. They approached their children -- daughters Kendra, 18; LaRae, 16; Alisa, 15; and Meghan, 12; and sons Sean, 9; Joseph, 7; and Ammon, 5 -- late one night with the idea of selling everything, buying a motor home and going on the road as bluegrass musicians.

"I thought they were crazy," said LaRae, who plays banjo, from the Palmer apartment where the Walkers are staying while the home-schooled children do mandatory testing. "But then I thought it'd be fun."

"It was really freeing," selling off all the family assets, Kendra said. Although she planned on attending college in Idaho, she made the decision to attend school online and follow a girlhood dream of becoming a singer. With her high, clear soprano and songwriting ability, Kendra is generally the band's lead vocalist.

While the family sorted, sold and organized, Apryll went online to find gigs. She found Web sites of other family bands who listed their schedules and called those venues. By

the time they left Alaska in a 38-foot RV last November, they'd traded their furniture, upgraded their instruments and planned a tentative performance schedule.

First, they spent seven weeks in Nashville for an unofficial internship. There they met notables like musicians Tim O'Brien and Doyle Lawson and his Quicksilver band. While Brett telecommuted as a real-estate consultant and the children studied by day, nights were spent at the Station Inn, a renowned venue for bluegrass up-and-comers.

"We were there every night on the front row," Brett said, laughing. "I think we paid their light bill that month."

All those rubbed shoulders made them realize "how small we are and how far we have to go," LaRae said. "We thought we were unique."

"It opened our eyes to how much we had to learn," Kendra said.

The girls put in three to seven hours of practice per day; their younger brothers started to get interested and picked up the fiddle. Gradually, the boys' talents were included as the RedHead Express transformed itself from sounding like a church choir to a bluegrass band.

So far, they've had gigs in 11 states, including a memorable performance in Georgia when the audience threw money on the stage as a sign of approval. They've studied with banjo expert/songwriter Jim Connor and Bear Foot's Jason Norris, played at the Palatka Bluegrass Festival in Florida and recorded a demo CD that included Kendra's original songs.

The RedHead Express leaves again in June for a tour through the West and South. They're booked through next April. Meanwhile, when the family practices, the sounds of banjo, mandolin, fiddle and guitar rattle the walls of their tiny apartment. Voices blend like coffee and cream, the singers oblivious to close quarters or bare floors.

"In love with love, it's sad but it's true," Kendra sang recently in a rough-edged soprano, her eyes closed, her sisters and parents in accompaniment. She could be singing about a man or -- more likely -- the music. "Fallin' in love is so easy to do. I'm so in love with lovin' you."

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The RedHead Express, are; Apryll and Brett (mom and dad), Kendra, 18; Alisa, 15; Meghan, 12; and LaRae, 16. Center from left, are: Joseph, 7; Sean, 9; and Ammon, 5. Cocoa is the family dog. Last year the Walkers rented their home and headed down the road on a

