Good songs and good deeds

BY JACK BESS

"Cabaret" may evoke swank nightclub and two-drink minimums, but a group of local singers has another way for you to come hear the music play. Acts Of Kindness Cabaret, or AOK Cabaret, is composed of volunteer professional singers who perform shows to raise money for non-profit organizations serving those in need. Last year, the group raised $36,000 and this year promises to be even more successful, said Hilary Ann Feldman, AOK founder, director and performer.

"A Little Help From My Friends," AOK show on March 3, will raise funds for Highland Park's Music Arts School, where Feldman studied piano in the early 1980s and now serves on the voice faculty.

Feldman learned about philanthropy, as well as how to play the piano, from the school's founder Mortimer Scheff, an acclaimed pianist. "He really believed that everyone had a musical gift and that everyone deserved a good musical education, no matter what their talent level," she said.

Musical variety
"A Little Help From My Friends" highlights themes of musicals, particularly "Cabaret," says Feldman. "In the intimate cabaret mode, audience members of all ages connect with the dizzyingly fast patter of Stephen Sondheim's "Getting Married Today" or the daffy humor of Cole Porter's "Friendship," which asks "If you ever take a boat and get lost at sea, write to me." While older folks revel in the great tunes they hear at AOK shows, kids as young as 6 enjoy the music too. "They've been to shows like 'Wicked' and they want to do that but they don't know how; they feel so distant from the big stars. But they see a personal connection at our shows. It's like having their big brother or sister on stage, says Hannah Goaltone, vice president of the AOK Cabaret board.

Helper network
Feldman founded AOK Cabaret in 2001, inspired by an account of a woman who organized a volunteer network of knitters to make blankets for children in hospitals around the world. "I'd been looking for ways to do something like that," she said. I was a cabaret singer but no one knew who I was. But once I turned it into being about the organizations I wanted to help and not about me, this organization sort of formed itself."

Feldman named the group after "the idea of a kindness chain, that if you do something good, someone else will feel good and do something good." Cabaret shows, that make friends, personal connection between audience and performer, are an ideal way to implement kindnesses, Feldman believes.

"It's an intensely personal evening of songs and stories delivered by singers in a simple, honest way," she said. "At the end of a cabaret show, you should feel like you've just had coffee with the singers and have gotten to know them a bit."