

Ryan Featherer (top center) with students on board the *Radiance of the Seas*



Northern Exposure for Strings

Virginia orchestra takes in the sights and sounds of an Alaskan cruise

It all started one evening in May 2009, when Ryan Featherer, orchestra director at Maury High School in Norfolk, Virginia, was watching *The Deadliest Catch*, a reality TV show about fishermen in Alaska. “I said to myself, ‘I need to take my students there,’” he recalls. “Yes, it is way outside the box, but how many times in your life can you say you’ve been to Alaska? It was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for them, and I knew I just had to make it happen.”

Featherer is used to traveling with his ensemble; they go on a trip every year. Still, the Alaskan itinerary he developed in collaboration with Music Tours Unlimited of Reading, Pennsylvania, was particularly complex. First, there was a flight to Anchorage, followed in quick succession by a journey

on the Alaskan Railroad and a seven-night cruise on Royal Caribbean’s *Radiance of the Seas*—during which the orchestra would perform three times, including once as part of a cruise festivals competition.

The prospect was exciting, but the fundraising hurdles were steep. “I swear,” Featherer says, “if I sold one more cheesecake, I would die. We sold everything under the sun and washed about a billion and one cars. I also arranged all the off-ship excursions. Basically, I had no life last year.”

In the end, however, everything came together. On June 24, 2010, a group of 62 students and chaperones flew from Norfolk to Atlanta to Anchorage. The next morning, they went by rail to Seward and boarded the cruise liner, which made stops in Ket-

chikan, Juneau, Skagway, Vancouver, and finally Seattle, where they caught the plane back home on July 3. Featherer confesses that he was nervous about the cruise: “I was expecting to find my students complaining that they were bored. How wrong I was. They were awestruck from the moment the plane landed in Anchorage to the moment we left Seattle.”

Actually, the awestruck reactions started even *before* the plane landed in Anchorage. “It was a cloudy day,” Featherer says, “and about 6.5 hours into a 7.5-hour flight, the pilot came over the P.A. system and said that we were passing over our first glacier. I took pictures of my students’ faces as they pressed their noses against the window. To me, that was worth the work!” —Mac Randall