

Plainfield teacher hopes to win Grammy

By **MARK SPIVEY**
STAFF WRITER

PLAINFIELD — City high school students could arrive at their vocal music classes in February to find they're suddenly under the tutelage of a Grammy Award-winning teacher.

The Rev. Stefanie Minatee, a 27-year veteran in Plainfield public schools, can be heard leading her choir Jubilation on the title track of "Oh Happy Day: An All-Star Music

Celebration," a compilation album of gospel songs recently nominated for the year's Best Traditional Gospel Album. Minatee plans to be in attendance with Queen Latifah, who sings lead vocals on the title track, for the awards ceremony scheduled for Jan. 31 in the Staples Center in Los Angeles.

"I really just can't say enough about how humbled I am for the honor," Minatee said Friday.

It is Minatee's first

Grammy nomination, but not the first in her family. Her mother, Pearl, won one in 1959, she said, performing with the Angelic Choir, a group based at First Baptist Church of Nutley. That was where Minatee said she first started singing at 13 under the direction of the legendary Lawrence Roberts, the late two-time Grammy winner who became the first black producer of a major U.S. recording company with his Newark-

based Savoy Records.

"He used to have everybody who was anybody" sing with the church choir, said Minatee, 52, recalling hearing soul greats Aretha Franklin and Dorothy Norwood perform there.

Minatee, a native of Newark who now lives in Union Township, would go on to direct the church choir herself and later became the artistic director for Jubilation. Based at the

See **Grammy**, Page **A5**



STAFF PHOTO: ANDREW MILLER

Plainfield music teacher Stefanie Minatee's choir sang the title track on "Oh Happy Day: An All-Star Music Celebration," recently nominated for a Grammy Award as Best Traditional Gospel Album.

Grammy

FROM PAGE A1

New Jersey Performing Arts Center — NJPAC — in Newark, the choir has more than 100 members.

Describing herself as a close friend of Latifah, a fellow Newark native whom she said she met in Nutley, Minatee said the Grammy- and Golden Globe-winning singer and actress asked her if she could coordinate having members of Jubilation back her up on "Oh Happy Day." About 20 Jubilation members performed the title track with Latifah, Minatee said.

The album also includes songs from Jon Bon Jovi, Aaron Neville and Michael McDonald, among others.

As voting member of the National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences, the group that hosts the Grammys, Minatee found out about the nomination sooner than most artists would have. She said she has no reservations admitting that she will cast a vote for her album — and will talk about its prospects of winning.

"I think we have a good chance," she said.

Minatee also is as an associate minister at Englewood's Community Baptist Church, having been ordained in 2002, and said she is studying to earn a doctoral divinity degree. She teaches vocal music at both Plainfield High School and the newly established Plainfield Academy for the Arts and Advanced Studies, where she said students recently gave her a thunderous reception when school director Angela Bento announced her nomination.

"They went crazy," she said.

Bento said she has supervised Minatee for 10 years and jokingly added



STAFF PHOTO: ANDREW MILLER

The Rev. Stefanie Minatee, a music teacher at Plainfield High School, sits in her classroom. Minatee directs a choir that performed with Queen Latifah for a track on a Grammy Award-nominated album.

that she hopes the prospect of fame will not go to her teacher's head.

"She still has to submit lesson plans, still has to follow all the rules if she wins," Bento said.

Minatee said that even if the album wins, she will not receive the iconic gold phonograph record that goes to award recipients — producers receive those in the category for which the album is nominated, she said, while performers re-

ceive certificates. But her work in music has little to do with accolades, she added.

"Gospel music should never be used to entertain — it should enlighten," she said, calling the genre "the opposite of blues."

"I want to lift people," she said. "I want to leave people different from before they encountered me."

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