

Music program hits right chord for cash-strapped families

Kathleen Renne, For Neighbours, *Thursday, November 19, 2009*

Ask any parent whose kid takes music lessons, and they'll all tell you the same thing: they're expensive.

Not only is the instruction pricey, there's also the issue of an instrument on which to practice.

If you're a parent struggling to make ends meet, such lessons are, frankly, out of the question. Such was the case for Venus Ouellette. The single mom of three, who works for a land-development company, recalls her boys' desire to play the guitar.

"The youngest one, if he saw anyone playing an acoustic guitar, he would start pawing it, touching it, begging to hold it. My other boy wanted to play an electric guitar. I thought, I just can't make it fly, I can't make it work," she says.

Her daughter Rochelle, 11, was studying piano, and Ouellette was already cancelling lessons here and there "to cut corners and save money." It seemed like Guitar Hero would be as close as the boys could get to their musical aspirations, until the Legacy Children's Foundation "Gift of Music" program entered the picture.

Now, both Ouellette's sons-- Sebastian, 7, and Zach, 9--have guitars and weekly, 30-minute lessons under the instruction of Bowtown Music's Kuba Suttles.

"If it wasn't for Legacy, it just wouldn't have happened. My children's desire to play the guitar just would not have been financially doable," Ouellette says.

The Legacy Children's Foundation collects donated instruments --both used and new--and loans them to families in need. The Foundation also helps subsidize the cost of music lessons up to \$1,000 per year.

Perhaps not surprisingly, of the approximately two hundred instruments Legacy has distributed, guitars are the most popular.

Darryl Wernham, who also knew poverty as a child, started the Foundation seven years ago. But, in the beginning, music wasn't a part of the equation.

"We originally wanted to raise funds for early intervention programs, but preventive programming didn't sell well," Wernham says.

So, about four-and-a-half years ago, he re-configured the Foundation to include giving the gift of music to children whose parents could not otherwise afford it.

Wernham's interest in helping youth stems from his decades in the social-work field, a career that has taken him through halfway houses, hospitals and Children's Services.



CREDIT: Leah Hennel, Calgary Herald - Kuba Suttles teaches Zach Sarkozy, 9, left, and his brother Sebastian Sarkozy, 7, the guitar through the legacy Children's Foundation "Gift of Music" program.

"I know what it costs to take a child out of a home and put him into child welfare. In the long run, as long as it's safe, it's much healthier for a kid to stay at home," Wernham says.

Another incentive to distribute instruments to financially-challenged families was Wernham's late father-in-law, Calgary musician Stanley Finn. Finn was one of the original faculty members in the Department of Music at the University of Calgary.

The "Gift of Music" program is a way to help keep Finn's legacy alive.

Wernham isn't a musician himself, but he appreciates what music has to offer.

"I was a DJ for 12 years doing dances in the community. That's as close as I got, but I understand music and the power of it. Every kid needs something to attach to. If we can get them excited about music, it has potential lifelong opportunities," Wernham says.

Even though her sons only began their lessons in September, Ouellette has already seen the impact first-hand.

"There's a little bit of competition going on, but it has given them an outlet. They feel good about themselves and their lessons, and it has given them a sense of purpose," she says, adding they practice at least every second day.

Wernham emphasizes that, just as important as the music itself, is the role of the teacher as mentor. "A lot of kids don't have anyone significant in their lives. These people become powerful role models for them," Wernham explains. Again, Ouellette agrees.

"It's so easy to get them to go to their lessons, because they love seeing Kuba. They want to impress him," she says, noting that's an incentive for the boys to practice.

Some instructors, like Suttles, teach out of their own studios. Others go to where the kids are, such as the teen drop-in centre known as The Chill Zone, and the Aboriginal Friendship Centre.

Ouellette emphasizes the positive impact the program has not just on kids, but also on parents who are under financial pressure and may otherwise resent monies spent on lessons, resentment that would trickle down to the children.

"They'll (Sebastian and Zach) have a better experience, because I don't have emotional strain on me that I'll take out on them and the instrument," Ouellette explains.

The Legacy Children's Foundation "Gift of Music" program has big plans for the future, including offering studio time and organizing public concerts.

In the meantime, they are always looking for donations of gently-used instruments, especially guitars.

You can drop off instruments at several locations around the city including the Kerby Centre and St. John's Music. The Foundation will appraise instruments for tax receipt purposes. For more information on donating, visit legacy-foundation.ca.

"We need to do something that makes a difference to prevent things like homelessness from happening. Music is one of those things. I've worked in hospitals and halfway houses. I know what the impact is by not doing something like what we're trying to do," Wernham says.

Ouellette adds, "Not all children have access to all the incredible things that are out there. These children are reaping lifetime skills, and their childhood is much richer, because of what Legacy has to offer."