

## Bring Back the Music

by Swanee Hunt, Scripps Howard News Service, September 17, 2003

All I really need to know I learned in music class. Those lessons came back to me as I watched an elementary school music teacher instruct her students, in a rundown neighborhood on the outskirts of Boston. Courage: "Who's willing to go first?" Awareness: "Listen to each other." Perseverance: "If you make a mistake, just keep going." Teamwork: "Stay exactly with the person next to you." Responsibility: "Don't leave your violin in a draft." In one room, eight clarinets squeaked out "This Old Man" and "Frere Jacques." Down the hall, flutes tooted a rendition of "Ode to Joy" that may have made Beethoven roll over, but it was music to my ears.

The classes are part of Bring Back the Music, a program providing weekly instrumental instruction to fourth and fifth grade students, 83% of whom qualify for federally subsidized lunches. Many of the kids are immigrants; music is their common language. Four years ago, a board member of Young Audiences, a non-profit organization, spotted a pile of dusty instruments, long untouched in a school warehouse and decided to put them to good use. As program director Gail Zarren says, "The kids in this program are young, and this really bolsters their confidence.... In high school and junior high they're less likely to retreat into their shell."

Like many arts and education programs, Bring Back the Music is in financial straits. The hope was that the Boston Public School system would see the value of these lessons and fund the program. But in Massachusetts, as in states across the nation, arts education programs are being slashed. The states' actions are mirrored at the federal level: the education budget proposed by the White House and Senate Republicans cuts \$200 million from the much-touted No Child Left Behind Act. The proposed House version of the education appropriations bill actually zeroed out arts for kids.

Those budget cuts belie the value of arts training, which can strengthen a student's problem-solving, critical thinking, and goal-setting skills. In fact, students who participated in music programs three times a week scored an average of 40 percent higher in science, math, reading, and history, according to a 1999 UCLA study. A Wisconsin study by Rauscher and Zupan showed that kindergarten students given classroom piano instruction scored 48 percent higher on spatial-temporal skill tests.

Bring Back the Music was sliding back into oblivion until some parents rallied to raise money. Most of these families are struggling to make ends meet. Their children don't have the same chances as other kids, so they're writing grants, holding fundraisers, and finding help anywhere they can. A construction worker dad cornered the head of the PTA to share his excitement. He didn't know much about music until his daughter started playing the clarinet, but he became so enchanted that he bought them both tickets to a concert at a local high school. He gushed that his daughter had "loads of talent," and "one day she'll play in big concerts, too."

This experience isn't just good for the children. It also strengthens the bond between parent and child. One mother, whose boy was struggling to play the flute, was determined to help her son. She took the subway, then a bus, then trooped over to the school, sat through lessons, and practiced with him in the evenings—all because it meant so much to him.

Music teacher Martha Watson told me about a troubled—and trouble-making—student. He couldn't practice his violin at home in the afternoon: his mother worked nights and didn't want him disturbing her rest. The young boy hounded his mother until she finally agreed to let him continue lessons the next year. He came in early every morning to practice before school. When Ms. Watson had breakfast duty and couldn't help him, he wept. The violin was his stabilizer, and music days were better days for all his teachers.

The power of bringing back the music is profound. One little girl, on the last day of class, stood quietly in the back of the room with her violin cradled in her arms, while everyone else lined up to turn in their instruments. When the bell rang, she approached her teacher, knowing the time had finally come. She hugged her violin tightly, kissed it gently, and said to her teacher, "I feel like I'm giving a piece of my heart away."

Recommendation: Let's push for bows to pull across strings—and mend a heart.