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Striking a Chord

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Striking a Chord

Illinois Wesleyan students offer free music lessons to area youth

March 25, 2015

At the Boys & Girls Club (BGC) of Bloomington-Normal, music lessons commence at a corner of a 6-foot folding table, and performances ring forth from the stage of a gym that still rings with shouts from last night's basketball game. But to the youth who get free, one-on-one lessons from a mentor they admire, performing at Carnegie Hall could not be any sweeter.

Every Saturday morning during the school year, Bloomington-area youth learn piano, violin, guitar, clarinet and other instruments from Illinois Wesleyan students who receive no academic credit or monetary stipend for their efforts. The program, called Mini Masters, was the brainchild of IWU student Courtney Balk '13. During her senior year at Illinois Wesleyan, Balk was inspired to create a way to provide positive role models – musical and otherwise – for local kids. Balk started with a one-day music event at BGC, and while that experience was successful, she wasn't satisfied. Balk wanted to develop a program that would provide consistent instruction, inspire kids to dream big about both college and music, and carry on after she graduated.

A music and English-literature double major, Balk spent much of her last fall as a college student contacting potential partners, and by spring, the Boys & Girls Club had agreed to host the program. Illinois Wesleyan students, including Cara Fulcher '16, Julie Lewis '16 and Hannah Eby '15, were eager to help, whether it was teaching lessons or working out the many details that went into getting the program off the ground.



Courtney Balk '13



Viola student Ben Nguy

"It's a mutually beneficial partnership," said Balk, who continues her love for music, literature and working with kids as a children's librarian in the Chicagoland area. "IWU offers rich resources in college mentors that the kids at BGC can benefit from, while BGC offers opportunities for aspiring teachers to teach. I just needed to link the two together, and the most important thing I did was hand off leadership the next year."

The succession plan included Eby, Fulcher and Lewis, who lead the program this year. Eby and Lewis received a 2014 Weir Fellowship. An external grant and a fundraiser with Phi Mu Alpha Sinfonia music fraternity added more funding. With the money, IWU students purchased music stands and ukuleles, repaired instruments, created a music library, offered stipends for transportation, and continue to cover other

miscellaneous expenses associated with running the program. Now in its third year, the program has served dozens of elementary and junior high kids with free lessons, trips to an Illinois Wesleyan concert each semester, and a brief performance for the children's parents at the end of each session. At least half a dozen IWU students commit to teach on a given Saturday.

That consistency is a critical element of the program. "One of the first things we talk about in our introductory meetings is our reliability," said Lewis, a Hispanic Studies and sociology double major. "We stress that we will be here every single Saturday to work on their skills, and to build relationships. A couple of the kids have been coming all three years that we've been doing this, and it's so cool to see how their confidence is improved and how excited they are to continue and progress with their music."

Flats and sharps, bars and measures are not the only topics student and mentor discuss. One of the program's original goals was to help the kids to dream big by talking about college and the opportunities of higher education. It's an aspiration for 10-year-old Lexie Williams. Lexie currently strums a bright yellow ukulele adorned with a smiley face, a Christmas gift encouraged by her Mini Masters experience. But she hopes to go to college and keep playing her instrument – guitar is next up, just as soon as she grows into it – in part because her mentor, Eby, provides encouragement.

“Being able to inspire kids to find the happiness I’ve found in music, and to fuel their desires to be passionate about music, is really exciting,” said Lewis. Eby sees growth in Lexie’s confidence each week.

The lessons build confidence in IWU student Fulcher as well. As a music education major, she relishes the opportunity to practice her teaching skills, although on some Saturdays that means juggling more students than she would like. “It’s great experience, though, and some weeks when we’re leaving [the Boys & Girls Club], I just have the biggest smile on my face thinking, ‘That was a great lesson.’ At least for today, I really made a difference in someone’s life.”

Making a difference hearkens back to Mini Masters’ origins. As a member in IWU’s Action Research Seminar, Balk said Director Deborah Halperin challenged the IWU students not only to make a positive change in their communities, but to do it now. Eby says the program turns college students into community leaders.

“Mini Masters shows students they have the power to make a very real difference in kids’ lives,” said Eby. “We’re not just college students — we’re also part of the community. We can make a difference here.”



Hannah Eby '15 (center) with her ukulele students Thomas Gutu and Lexie Williams

By Kim Hill and Danielle Kamp '15