

Harmonikids Hohner-Sponsored Session to Special Education Children at Kingsbury Middle School in Memphis, TN

On February 3, 2012 Harmonikids provided a special Blues Harmonikids session to children at Kingsbury Middle School in Memphis. Several years ago, I had visited the school to teach at the request of the Blues Foundation for their Blues in the Schools program. At that time I was impressed by the commitment that teacher Kathleen Riser had made to enhance the learning environment in her classroom. Specifically, she interspersed special education kids among the other children to foster positive interaction between the children. Indeed, what I saw was students helping students, enriching each other's experience. Those with learning challenges were not singled out, therefore protecting and boosting their self esteem, while providing assistance to them gave a purpose that elevated the aiding kid's esteem as well. I had every reason to be very enthusiastic about a return visit.

Such was the nurturing learning environment I enjoyed during my Feb 3rd Hohner-sponsored Harmonikids session in Ms. Riser's classroom. There was palpable joy and excitement as the kids filed in. Ms. Riser had told them weeks in advance about the special treat they would experience so there was happy anticipation in the air. There were roughly 60 participants, many of them special education students. The school Principal and Vice Principal were also in attendance. I had a very captivated audience as I performed and spoke. I taught the kids the history of the harmonica and the special relationship it has in the origin of the Blues. Examples of the music were introduced with special emphasis on the Blues as the roots of the music they listen to today. Though none of the students ever played a harmonica before, many of them were already musicians in Ms. Risers band program and I could feel their eager interest in learning a new instrument. When the harmonicas were handed out, the first song was learned in less than 30 seconds through my special teaching method. The room filled with giggles of pride and excitement. As we continued they were thrilled at learning a song I had just played for them in the history portion of my program - Bo Diddley's familiar harmonica riff in "I'm a Man". They played along together beautifully as I strummed it on guitar. We continued with "When the Saints Go Marching In" which they were of course no stranger to and happy to learn. They loved learning this familiar gospel song with its nearby Southern origins. Everyone wanted to take turns "soloing" to show off their new found talent. The session went overtime, with the principal's blessings as I taught the students a twelve bar Blues.

The kids had all fully immersed themselves in the lesson and now beamed with pride and a sense of accomplishment. As always I ended with a Q and A session. They asked many pertinent questions, but one of the deepest questions I'd ever received in a classroom came from a small and very thoughtful boy named Dorian, whose focus had been particularly sharp throughout my session. When I called on him he stood up and asked "Have you had to overcome

obstacles in your pursuit of your goals as a musician?" I explained that of course there have been many and that I still have challenges every day. I encouraged him and everyone to follow their hearts and never give up in their own pursuits. Later I found out that Dorian (who is Vice President of the school band) is a child of parents from Mexico who have faced difficult immigration issues. As such, his mere enrollment and attendance in school had been a challenge in and of itself.

Perhaps the impact of my session is best described in Ms Riser's wonderful correspondence below, where she mentions Dorian and some of the other children. There is talk of a child's plans of expanding and sharing her new talent with her church congregation. There are plans to perform together for a Black History Month recital. Of note, Ms Riser also mentions a student that she explained wanted to attend my session but could not. As she related to me, this student is the young daughter of Afghan parents who have forbidden her to take part in school musical programs due to "cultural differences". I tried to imagine her challenges as a non-english speaking child in a new environment, who is not allowed to participate in an activity whose very essence transcends language barriers and cultural differences. I gave Ms. Riser a harmonica to give the child. Whether or not she will be able to keep it doesn't matter - I wanted to reach out to her in some way as an encouraging gesture through Harmonikids. Her reaction described below touches my heart.

As is often the case, the benefits that kids with learning challenges get from my sessions on the surface are immediate and joyful, providing an instant sense of achievement that builds their self esteem. However, you never know how deep the influence of Harmonikids outreach will go. Often it is a seed you plant, which grows, flowers, and bears fruit later. There's no question that many of the children will further investigate, collaborate, hone and expand their new-found skill. To some as in Ms. Riser's class, it was not only a fun new activity - it was an immediate new path to interact with and provide a helping hand to their less fortunate peers. In any case, I suspect that many will not forget the day in Ms. Riser's class when a professional harmonica player came to them from Los Angeles, to teach, entertain, and gift them with a friendly new instrument from a company called Hohner, through which they can explore, express, and share the joy of music with the world.

~ Gary Allegretto

Dear Gary,

I have received so many positive comments about the workshop you held for Kingsbury MS in Memphis TN! The Special Education teachers are using the harmonicas you provided as a learning incentive in their classrooms. These children have specific learning disabilities, but were able to pick up so much from the music you introduced them to. The other day, I had one young boy from this class come up to me and pulled

out his harmonica and said, "Look Mrs. Riser, I'm playing the blues!" He was so proud and excited to be able to play for me. I gave the harmonica to the young lady we spoke about who had been removed from the music class because of her cultural differences. She grinned and said "mine?" When I answered yes she grabbed me and hugged me and told me thank you. She said, "I love music." What a blessing to be able to allow her to develop her love for music.

Dorian, my band vice president, wrote an essay about the workshop. In his essay he said, "There are so many famous and talented musicians in the world, how come more are not like Gary Allegretto and share their music and talent with young people?" This is also the same student who asked you the question, "What obstacles did you have to overcome to make it in music?" He proceeded to say, "People like Gary can influence young people to make better choices." Even though you came to share music with my students, you ended up sharing much more. You demonstrated that there are people who care about them outside of their family and the classroom. For this, I personally thank you.

Ms. Young, my assistant principal, said the only thing she wished to be different was that there needed to be more time! She enjoyed the workshop and commented that it not only provided the students with a hands-on leaning it also gave them an insight to the history of music and how music has been passed down from generation to generation.

Evelyn, another band student, said "Gary is awesome! Can you bring him back again? But, next time, tell him to bring some pictures that he can autograph!" I think you have a fan! Evelyn has also used the information you provided to do some more research. She plans on learning to play Amazing Grace on the harmonica and perform it for her church.

Mr. Mackin, the principal of KMS, said "Man, he can really play!" "Next time he comes, I'm going to bring my sons so they can hear him and learn!" He told me that I could have you back "anytime!"

As for me, words can not express enough gratitude for sharing with my students. I have to agree with Dorian, that more people need to be willing to share their love of music with young people. We are planning to have a small group play When the Saints Go Marching In on our Black History Program. So, the learning continues. Thank you so much for you time and love for kids!

Sincerely,
Kathleen Riser
Band Director
Kingsbury Middle School
Memphis TN