

Arts in Mind

A series from Kiddo that explores arts and arts education

Nora Thomas, Mill Valley K-2 Music Teacher, Discusses her Passion for Music with Old Mill Parent Tracey Gant.

Part One of Two

Tracey Gant: What is your music background?

Nora Thomas:

As a young child, I would sit and watch my grandmother teach piano lessons. Starting at age three I was begging her to teach me, and by age five my hands hit the piano and never stopped. I began playing wind instruments in the sixth grade. I started with the clarinet, and began playing saxophone shortly after. Although I loved taking piano lessons, playing in school bands, and performing with choirs, I was certainly never a virtuoso. I was kid. I grew up on the North Shore of Lake Tahoe, and most afternoons, I was not found at the piano practicing scales, but out riding my bike, skiing, or building forts.

When I began college, I still did not know I would major in music. At nineteen I was playing with many different bands that often played the bar scene. I was playing reggae, funk, blues, and rock, and believe it or not, it was there that I finally found direction.

Adults would come up to me and share stories of how their music teacher told them they couldn't sing, or say how lucky I was that I could play music. It was then that I truly realized the gift of music. I began to think of my life without it, and I ached, just like the thought of losing a loved one. It was then that I knew... just like my grandmother, I was to teach and share the gift of music.

My life then became a whirlwind of performing and teaching. I found an amazing husband-and-wife musical duo that helped direct my natural passion. With the experienced pair, we began a community children's choir that now boasts 4 choirs and

over 100 members, and we began an elementary music program in a district with no funds for music. I also began to find joy in a new instrument, the baton. Conducting bands and choirs provided a new level of musicianship, and I was fortunate to have a graduate assistantship conducting a college band. I was lucky to work in many facets teaching music, and even more fortunate to find a job in Mill Valley to begin the next chapter of my life.

TG: How does music instruction benefit children?

Nora Thomas:

We expect so much from our children. We expect them to do well in school, make friends, help out at home, and learn how to become citizens of our country. These are all wonderful attributes of being human, yet at a young age there is no other subject that fully allows kids to be kids than music.

As young children sing and play music, we are not only giving them the gift of song, but internally they are making irreplaceable connections in their brains that will aid in their learning for the rest of their lives. However, the best part of the deal is that the students do not realize that they are learning. When they sing and tap the rhythm, they do not know that it will help them in math when they learn fractions, or in language arts as they learn to read.

Singing games, present in every society around the world, permeate every part of the brain. We are building social connections, creating mathematical patterns, memorizing, improvising, exercising, learning about our history, but most importantly, we are teaching our children to express themselves.

Part Two of this interview will appear in next month's column.

Nora Thomas is a second-year K-2 music teacher with Mill Valley Schools. Kiddo is the Mill Valley Schools Community Foundation.

