

Arts in Mind

A series from Kiddo that explores arts and arts education

Nora Thomas, Mill Valley K-2 Music Teacher, Continues Her Discussion about Teaching Music with Old Mill Parent Tracey Gant and Park Parent Suz Lipman.

Part Two of Two

Tracey Gant: What is your music philosophy?

Nora Thomas:

Every child deserves music. It is truly a living art: an expression of the present moment, a connection to the past, and insight into the future.

The rich history of culture all around the world is dying. As we become more technologically advanced, we are losing human connection. A person really could live in a house and order all necessities of life either online or over the phone.

I can remember my great grandmother singing to me in Italian. She would sing the songs that her grandmother used to sing to her, and the songs she used to sing with her friends. Our family gatherings were filled with accordions, singing and piano playing. It was timeless. Unfortunately, the tradition of song is not passed from one generation to the next in our fast-paced society.

Music is the key to understanding cultural diversity; It is truly a universal language. In our country, especially in California, we must preserve the gems of our culture and continue to share and pass along the music of our past. Our children will grow as diverse humans with a greater understanding of what has come before them and the trained ears to guide them in the future.

TG: What can parents do to support their children's musical interests?

Nora Thomas:

Encourage quality music. Usually the first step in accomplishing this is to turn off the radio. Help your child understand music as a highly disciplined art. Attend concerts with live music and try small venues where you may sit close to the musicians. Perhaps try to find music of a different culture each month, and learn about the group or style of music before you attend. Try to have an hour each night where the television is turned off and listen to music instead.

If your child is interested in taking lessons on an instrument, there are some important things to remember. Learning music should be a joy, but there is a balance as not all music learning is easy. Make sure your child knows that learning an instrument takes patience and practice. Build a relationship with the private teacher in order to create a balanced practice schedule that encourages your child but does not push too hard.

Most importantly, encourage your child to sing. The voice is the only instrument that each one of us was born with. And if trained at a young age, all people can be tuneful, and yes, all people can sing. Allow them to sing along with Britney Spears, but like junk food, poor quality music should be used sparingly in the musical diet.

Suz Lipman: What have you enjoyed most about teaching music in Mill Valley?

Nora Thomas:

I have enjoyed the process of finding my place in a new community. Two years ago I was a strange face in Mill Valley, and now it is my home. The smiles and nods of recognition on the weekends and afternoons by students and families build and reaffirm the deep connection to my work -- enhancing the quality of life through music. This year it has also been incredibly amazing to begin work as the Associate Conductor for the Marin Symphony Youth Orchestra. The job provides wonderful balance to the elementary music position, and I am working with amazing young musicians from all over Marin.

SL: What are the challenges and joys of working with the K-2 age group?

Nora Thomas:

The only challenge remains in keeping up with them -- planning well enough to never have a moment of question, always pushing them forward through every minute of class. Another challenge is keeping the balance between being firm and fun, all while teaching musical concepts.

Yet I have always thought that if I could take smiles to the bank, I would be a millionaire. The greatest joy of teaching K-2 music is the children: their voices, their excitement, and their thirst for knowledge. I love giving them opportunities to grow as people and to build social connections within their classes. I also enjoy watching their independence increase as the year progresses. There is something so touching about standing in the middle of a circle of children, their hands linked together, singing. Giving the gift of music is truly the greatest joy.

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