

## **Striking a chord**

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[Monadnock Ledger-Transcript](#)

School music programs have often held the precarious position of being among the first cut during difficult times, but the Rindge Memorial School community is showing that it marches to the beat of its own drum, or in this case, guitar.

A class of Rindge fifth-graders sits down to its second guitar lesson as a part of the regular music curriculum last week. One boy, who has had lessons before, plucks the strings of the guitar in his lap, tuning it for a classmate. Others sit in a circle, waiting for their teacher, Deb Rainey, to tell them it is time to retrieve their own guitars. Her guitar sits on a stand in the center of the circle.

In groups of five, Rainey calls them to the music supply closet, where there are more than 20 guitars in an assortment of cases and cardboard boxes. The students return to the circle and hold their instruments, ready to rock.

A few months ago, none of those guitars were there, and the program itself was a dream in the heads of Rainey and Rousseau's Music storeowner, Mike Rousseau in Jaffrey. Rainey had very little money in her budget for instruments, and the grant proposals she submitted for the project were denied.

As a last resort, she appealed to the community through the school newsletter and announcements at recent student recitals. The response was tremendous.

"I was amazed in these hard economic times at how it came together, and I'm still amazed," Rainey says. "The community is very supportive of the music program here."

When Rainey first became full-time at the school, 17 years ago, student concerts included the whole school, from kindergarten to fifth grade. Now, the concerts are so popular that in order to fit the audience inside the gym, she has to have three concerts, consisting of only two grades apiece.

Rainey asked community members to either donate money or old guitars they no longer used. In order to help the program along, Rousseau offered a special beginner guitar price of \$69.95 for the school, reduced from about \$100.

Fifth-grade parent Nicholas Panagiotes had a guitar, handed down from a relative, laying around the house. He never learned, though, and the guitar remained unused for three or

four years. After hearing an announcement at a student concert, he and his wife decided to donate it to the school.

“It’s an excellent idea; it’s good to have some creativity going on,” Panagiotis says of the program. He adds that his son Christopher is in the program and loves it.

Rindge Memorial School fourth-grade teacher Jenifer Bell also had a guitar she was not using that she decided to donate.

“It was my guitar I played when I was in high school and college and I used it when I first started teaching,” Bell said. “I’ve been teaching for 28 years and I don’t have time for it because days are so busy.”

Bell said that the program is important, particularly for children who find that music is the area in which they shine.

“I think it’s awesome,” Bell says. “Besides learning to read music, the guitar is an instrument you can take with you anywhere you go. It is a real benefit for the kids involved.”

Ken Smith of Rindge-based classic rock band Sheep Dip decided to get the band together and donate enough money for three guitars.

“We have three guitar players, so we thought it was fitting to donate three guitars,” Smith said.

He said the band, which likes to get involved in community projects, saw a natural tie in with their own local music and the support of Rousseau’s Music Store.

“The way we saw it, it’s a win-win all around,” Smith said. “You’re putting an ax in the kid’s hand, you’re supporting a local music store and you’re supporting the school.”

Along the way, Rousseau donated time and expertise to the program, making flyers and repairing donated guitars. He has spent the last few months adding bridges, saddles and strings to the old guitars. One guitar he had to convert from left-handed to right-handed. “Deb had the need and John Stone, the principal, was supportive,” Rousseau said. “Everyone did their part.”

For Rainey, there is also an academic interest. Enrolled in a Master’s of Education program at Antioch University New England, Rainey is researching how learning an instrument improves a student’s ability to read music.

While Rainey says there are many ways to teach reading music, instrumental music has the advantage of providing a student with an everyday application.

Rainey's students now learn three instruments over the course of their time at Rindge Memorial School. In the third grade, they learn the recorder; in the fourth grade, they learn the dulcimer; and in the fifth grade, they play the guitar.

The dulcimer has been a part of the curriculum for 15 years, but Rainey has never heard of one of her students going on to take it up after graduating. She has, however, had many students return playing guitar.

"When I ask kids what their favorite instrument is, it's either drums or guitar," Rainey says. "It's in most popular music and in many styles. It's a very visible instrument and it's very appealing to kids because it is so visible. Because of this strong appeal, they are very motivated to want to learn it."

Rousseau said his most popular music lessons at his store are piano and guitar, but these programs are rare in schools, and much less common than bands.

"It's kind of scratching the itch," Rousseau said. "Students are more into those instruments. A 'C' is a 'C' on a musical staff whether you're learning trumpet or guitar."

President of the local music booster club, Rousseau said it is a shame to see music programs cut, especially considering that he sees many of his music students on the honor roll and high honor roll. He said that he graduated Mascenic High School in 1974, and programs were just as in danger of being cut as they are now.

"There is something developmental that happens with students who play instruments," Rousseau says. "It's that diligence of having to do something every day."

In class, Rainey's students learn finger placement and a few chords. By the end of class, they strum along to rhythm exercises and play simple songs, while Rainey accompanies them.

Rainey admits that her classes of 20 students are much larger groups than her usual guitar lessons, but with the enthusiasm she has experienced, she hopes that there will be a performance component of the class at the end of the year.

Fifth grader Emily Payson is looking forward to it.

"It is really fun," she says.

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