

Reflections on Teaching & the Transformative Power of Music

After almost thirty years teaching elementary and intermediate school vocal music, I retired. In all that time I witnessed, over and over, the transformative power of music, especially when experienced and performed by children.

It took a while before I was able to sort through my huge collection of sheet music, books, percussion instruments, recorders, and other teaching materials and then pass it on to the new music teachers in our district. Because, in doing so, I had to stop and read the program notes from hundreds of concerts, look at photos from the musicals and performances, read piles of "Thank You" and "You're the Best Teacher Ever" letters and cards, and wear the paper crown a second-grader made for me with the words "Queen of Music" written on the front in crayon. Yes. I had saved it all.

One of the programs brought back the memory of Michael, an eighth-grade boy who came to the intermediate school where I taught chorus, show choir, and musical theater classes.

Michael entered the school after the semester was already underway, and the counselors enrolled him in beginning chorus telling me, "He's a Special Education student and there aren't any other electives open." His paperwork and academic records had not yet come from his previous school district. He was escorted into the room and I showed him where he would sit.

He was a big child with dark hair peeping out from his hooded sweatshirt even though it was a warm, autumn day. He kept his head down and didn't make eye contact with anyone, including me. As I handed him a music folder, the other students stared and shifted around in their chairs. We returned to our rehearsal, except for Michael who began to stare at me with what

appeared to be intense hatred. He remained that way for the remaining 35 minutes of the period.

The next day Michael came in, sat in his chair and pulled a black notebook binder and pen from his backpack. As we began to sing our warm-ups, Michael stared into my face while he stabbed the plastic cover of the book, slowly making cuts in it with his pen. If his intention was to intimidate me, it was starting to work. I still didn't know anything of his background and why he left his last school. The other students in our group were starting to give me that look all teachers recognize as, "Will you make him behave?" Of course I also felt pressure to get through all of our pieces. We needed every minute of rehearsal time.

I looked at that angry face as he punctured his notebook and thought, "This is how I die - stabbed in the neck with a ball point pen in my beloved choir room." But another part of me believed that he must have been nervous to come to a new school, into the choir classroom, late in the semester and barely able to read in his English class let alone find his part in SAB music. This big, tough, scary kid had been placed in a class where everyone else knew what to do. We had already spent weeks working on notes, rhythms, melodies, phrasing, text, and expression for each of the pieces. So...

I stopped playing the piano and put on an accompaniment CD. I took a deep breath, a copy of the music and sat in the seat right next to him. I said nothing but began to sing the baritone part with the rest of the boys who looked at me nervously. My index finger pointed to the text and the rise and fall of the part as we sang. I gave directions to the choir members, as needed, and we continued through to the end of the song.

Michael stopped the violent behavior

immediately, changed his posture to that of a curious kid, and started to follow my finger with his eyes! I continued this technique of teaching for a few more days and soon he began to add his voice to mine and the rest of the ensemble. To my pleasant surprise his voice had a rich, warm tone and he sang on pitch. He still didn't speak but the ripped, punctured notebook no longer came out of the backpack.

After another few days into this process of directing from a chair in the baritone section, I walked in to the classroom and saw one of the other boys sitting next to him. "I'll help Michael today. You need to get back on the podium."

And so it went with students taking turns helping Michael. He watched my face and directions. He sang with emotion, sometimes even swayed gently with the melodies.

Michael sang proudly in the concert even though no family members were there to see his performance or wonderful transformation. When the concert was over he gave me a hug that almost cracked my ribs. And he had thirty new friends.

Yes, I know the power of music. I've heard and seen it transform classrooms, concert halls, theaters, football games, and parades. I've seen it enrich the lives of thousands of children. And I'll never forget the transformation of one special eighth-grade boy who gave up his practice of intimidation for a chance to sing in three-part harmony with his friends.

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SUPPORTING PEOPLE-TO-PEOPLE

The Midland Alumnae Chapter supported SAI Philanthropies' People-to-People project with a donation of one trombone, one clarinet, and three flutes to the band program at Ronald McNair Magnet Middle School in Rockledge, Florida. The instruments were repaired and sent to Band and Orchestra Director Michelle Scheen, an affiliate of the Orlando Alumnae Chapter, this past fall after she requested assistance for the school's program.

