

Student plays it forward Kids in need get free music lessons

By Karen Campbell, Globe Correspondent | October 22, 2006

When Berklee College of Music student Rick Aggeler was growing up, he couldn't participate in sports or physical activities because of a medical condition. What he could do, and do very well, thanks to one devoted teacher, was play music, especially the drums.

"My elementary school teacher essentially saved my life and turned me around," he says. "I knew growing up that, at some point before my professional career took off, I had to spend some time giving back."

So, in between classes in his final year of college, Aggeler, 21, is giving the gift of music to nearly two dozen underserved children at the Boys and Girls Club/George Robert White Youth Development Center in Dorchester. What began last spring as occasional volunteer work at the club with Berklee alumnus Paul Vitolins has evolved into the center's first full-fledged music program.

Modeled after Berklee, the program offers free semi private music instruction on various instruments, as well as harmony, ear training, song writing, and ensemble playing. Students can also learn some of the ins and outs of music production: A special grant enabled the purchase of a G5 Mac computer, eight-track mixing board, microphones, and recording software. Roughly 40 children applied for the current program, though fewer than two dozen could be accepted; funding is limited, and Aggeler and Vitolins can teach only two afternoons a week.

Aggeler asks every potential student to write a half-page essay about why he or she wants to be in the program.

"That element's been a wonderful piece of the program," says Daphne Griffin, the club's executive director. "How often are young people given the opportunity to sit down and have moments of reflection, to look at themselves beyond today?"

She recalls a 9-year-old club member from a troubled background with whom the staff had a lot of behavior issues.

"Then I read the letter he wrote to Rick and Paul," Griffin says. "The passion came through, wanting to be part of it. He was so clear and articulate and energetic. It came out in the writing in a way that didn't come out with us in the club. He advocated for himself, and he's been very successful with the program."

Aggeler recalls 10-year-old twins from Puerto Rico who spoke no English jumping right into the program, connecting with the music.

"Whatever problems these kids may be having at home or at school, here they can take two drum sticks and three little drums and have an outlet to express themselves," Aggeler said.

The center is so committed to the program that, in its current expansion plans, a new area has been designated as a performing arts center.

Aggeler, whose academic focus is entrepreneurship and world percussion, is trying to get funding for more teaching hours and to buy more instruments children could check out for home practice. Aggeler's dream is that some of his students ultimately will feed into Berklee's City Music Program, a scholarship and mentoring initiative providing free music instruction to underserved inner-city teenagers. And then, he says, who knows? ■