

THE *Current*

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Students, Alumni Bring Music and Mentorship to Local Schools

Just above the happy clamor of children's voices, multiple conversations competing indoors on a rainy day, there rises the lilt of a ukulele -- bright, warm tones evoking pleasant dreams and sunshine. The notes float in fits and starts, bubbles of whimsy breaking the surface. A music lesson is under way.

Selena Ross, a second-year student at UC Santa Barbara, is sharing her instrument and her expertise with Jasmine, an Isla Vista Elementary pupil and participant in the afterschool program that brought the pair together. Ross is mentoring Jasmine in music -- and tutoring her in math -- as a volunteer for a campus-based student organization and nonprofit called The MUSIC Club.

More commonly known by its acronym than its full name -- Musicians United in Supplemental Instruction for Children -- the club sends music-inclined college students into elementary schools, providing homework help and instrument instruction for underprivileged youth.

"It's a wonderful experience to see all these kids so thrilled by music and instruments," said Ross, a double major in sociology and English who is the club's co-president and on-site coordinator for Isla Vista Elementary. "They love to learn. The fact that we're able to work with these kids especially is such an important part of the program, and I feel we can have a true impact on kids who really appreciate it."

And that's the whole point. In 2006, on a \$10,000 service-project grant from the Donald Strauss Foundation, founder Areo Saffarzadeh ('07, business economics, biology) positioned music as a means of academic motivation for underprivileged children: Bang out the homework, then bang on the piano.

The MUSIC Club functions exactly the same way today, partnering with established afterschool programs to deliver its vision to socioeconomically disadvantaged fourth, fifth, and sixth graders in Goleta. Volunteers from UCSB -- the club averages more than 20 active mentors each quarter -- visit Isla Vista and El Camino elementary schools each afternoon. They have also served students from La Patera Elementary through an afterschool program at the Boys & Girls Club in Goleta.

"What makes being involved with this program so refreshing is these kids, because learning music, for them, is a huge privilege," said David Lee, the group's executive director and a UCSB alumnus ('11, biopsychology). "For them there is no entitlement. They love learning music and they know that when they work hard, behave well, and do their homework, they get to learn music. They don't have to, they get to, and that makes teaching and working with them all the better for us. That's a huge part of why we stay focused on serving an underserved population -- to open the opportunity to learn music to people who otherwise may not be able to."

That opportunity may one day be available to additional children, and not just in the immediate area. Local growth is imminent, said Lee, but The MUSIC Club's long-range goals also include expanding its efforts elsewhere by launching new chapters, or satellite operations, on other college campuses with underprivileged youth nearby. They also aspire to a capital project, aiming to eventually offer a music and tutoring site that could be shared by multiple programs.

The organization's steadfast devotion to engaging kids through music has struck a chord with teachers, who credit the still-small club with big impact.

"As a music teacher, I know in my core that music is essential for the development of children -- for their neural development, for their social development, for their self-esteem, and for the pure joy that it brings them," said Blair Looker, a music and art teacher at Isla Vista Elementary. "So when I see The MUSIC Club bringing both

one-on-one mentoring, tutoring for children, and music, I think it's the best of both worlds ... It's all part of a large dialogue between these excellent mentors and our young students, and I value it totally."

Looker has known The MUSIC Club since its 2006 inception, when Saffarzadeh and four friends first showed up at her school. She has since become an active advocate for the nascent nonprofit, recently joining its board of directors, and, through her Looker Family Foundation, awarding the group a \$10,000 grant.

"It is a strong organization that has grown into a really coherent program," Looker said. "I'm really appreciative of their vision and I think it's a model that can be used throughout the UC system -- at the minimum -- statewide, and possibly nationwide. It's a beautiful, simple model that enriches the UCSB students that are giving of their talent, and completely feeds and nourishes our students."

Such strong belief in the group appears to be growing. As a registered student organization and community nonprofit, The MUSIC Club has received a \$2,000 grant from the UC Institute for Research in the Arts, and a \$2,000 Community Arts Enrichment Grant through the Santa Barbara County Arts Commission and the Santa Barbara Bowl Foundation, in addition to the Looker Foundation award.

"Funding for arts education is oftentimes targeted as one of the lowest priorities when budgets are reduced for K-12 public education," said Catherine Boyer, acting director of Student Affairs Grants and Development. "The Looker Foundation gift demonstrates a strong commitment to both nurture the arts and make arts opportunities accessible for all our children. It also inspires our UCSB students to live their dreams: our student musicians are teaching their love of music to the next generation."

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† Top image: Alumnus David Lee, executive director of MUSIC Club, mentors Cristian, from El Camino Elementary, on trombone.

Credit: Rod Rolle

†† Middle image: Selena Ross, left, a second-year UCSB student double-majoring in sociology and communications, and MUSIC Club's co-president and site coordinator at Isla Vista Elementary, works on math and ukulele with Jasmine, right.

Credit: George Foulsham

††† Bottom image: Jennifer Chang, right, a first year UCSB student, gives a piano lesson to Isla Vista Elementary student Esmerelda, left.

Credit: George Foulsham

About UC Santa Barbara

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