

Posted on Friday, May. 07, 2010

Guitars Over Guns Operation brings instruments, inspiration to middle school

By JORDAN LEVIN

Edrice Gerbier is small for 11, though he usually makes up for it with an explosion of noise and motion. But the memory of two friends kicking another boy as he lay on the ground can stop him cold. ``They were kicking on him 'cause he was small," Edrice whispers, standing taut and still.

On this Wednesday afternoon, however, nothing can stop the diminutive live-wire, who is flying around a small classroom at North Miami Middle School banging assuredly on drum pads, clamoring for his turn on a keyboard, exuberantly making himself heard.

Once a week after school, Edrice and a dozen classmates let go of their worries by making music with GOGO, Guitars Over Guns Operation, a program created by Chad Bernstein, a PhD candidate at the University of Miami's Frost School of Music and trombonist for popular Miami bands Spam Allstars and Suenalo Sound System.



Teacher Chad Bernstein gives Rose Joseph, 12, a fist bump for her effort on the guitar as Jinny Leroy and Jamal Jacques wait their turn. CARL JUSTE / MIAMI HERALD STAFF

Bernstein, 26, has worked without pay on GOGO for over two years, aiming to help this

small group of kids -- and eventually, he hopes, many more -- find the inspiration and sense of purpose he discovered in music as an awkward, picked-on adolescent with A.D.D. who hated school.

``I don't know what I'd do besides music, and it's all because someone gave me that opportunity when I was a kid," says Bernstein, who grew up in suburban Chicago

``Now I'm looking around at a generation of kids who have no physical outlet, no musical outlet. The opportunity I was given in fourth grade to pick up an instrument and play in a band is not an option for kids anymore. If I hadn't had that, where would I be? I'd be another person. I'd be lost."

Musical opportunities are shrinking for kids in South Florida as budget shortfalls and pressure to improve standardized test scores take their toll on public-school arts programs. In Miami-Dade, money for new instruments and transportation to band competitions has been cut, and schools that don't enroll enough students in their music programs can lose them. In Broward, school officials are threatening to halve salaries for music and art teachers.

There are other pressures at North Miami Middle, where 1,100 students crowd a facility built for 800. Eighty-five percent are Haitian, a number that has grown almost daily since the earthquake, and nearly one-fifth get remedial English instruction. The youth violence that has claimed more than 20 lives in North Miami-Dade in recent years looms in the background.

Nonetheless, Principal Melanie Megias has kept band and guitar classes going, and last summer gave the go-ahead to GOGO.

``It's not necessarily always the academics that propel students to meet the challenges they have to meet," Megias says. ``We need

to find that thing that sparks the kid, that can be a motivator for them, whether it be music or sports."



Gibson Guimesly, 13, practices on the trombone. CARL JUSTE / MIAMI HERALD STAFF



Gibson making a clear tone for GOGO founder Chad Bernstein. CARL JUSTE / MIAMI HERALD STAFF

On this afternoon, Bernstein and fellow musician Augie Haas are leading the "GOGOS" through the mentoring discussion that begins each session. Encouraging the kids to avoid violence and stay in school is another goal of GOGO, which is run with **Communities in Schools**, a national dropout-prevention group that provides insurance, mentoring help and money for instruments.

Bernstein asks the kids to write down a description of a situation that made them uncomfortable. Most recount witnessing violence: a new girl beaten up after school; kids who offered to cut themselves in exchange for a dollar. Two boys bring up Michael Brewer, the Deerfield Beach 15-year-old who was set on fire by fellow teens.

Bernstein, a big, shaggy, genial guy, tries to talk them through hard-to-navigate situations.

"You may not be able to do something because you'll get jumped," he says. "But what happens when you fight? You might get hurt, or get in trouble. You'd have to drop out of this program. You need to know there are other options. You don't have to be with people who make you feel uncomfortable. You guys always have a choice."

Bernstein, who fantasized as a child about an international children's band that would show warring grown-ups how to get along, fondly recalls high school band competitions that brought together kids of all kinds from across Illinois to play.

"It blew my mind and really resonated with me in terms of music transcending all the things that keep people apart," he says.

Finally, it's time to play. Until today, the GOGOs have had to make do with clapping, singing and rapping; it wasn't until last month, after FCAT exams, that they were allowed to take a field trip to the Sam Ash music store in Miami Lakes to buy instruments. Now they tear into the precious packages: guitars, a keyboard, drumsticks and practice pads.

"It's like Christmas!" shrieks Jamal Jacques, 12.

Bernstein strains to balance discipline with his own excitement at the kids' enthusiasm. "Remember guys, these are not your instruments," he says. "They're our instruments."

Some, like Edrice, who plays drums and organ at his church, have had musical training. As Bernstein labors to teach four boys a simple drum pattern, 12-year-old Stanford Monpremier jumps in and expertly rips off the rhythm.

``Well, check you out!" Bernstein says, with a startled smile. At Sam Ash the boy showed ability on the trombone, and now Bernstein lets Stanford try his own horn, beaming as the boy blows a long, rich note.

``Now, that is an awesome sound," he says.

Herka Altentour bends over a guitar, trying to fit her fingers to the strings. The 11-year-old, who has lived in Miami with her father for four years, misses her mother back in Haiti. For the discussion, she wrote of having stage fright.



Edrice Gerbier, 11, holds a drum pad during a GOGO session at North Miami Middle.
CARL JUSTE / MIAMI HERALD STAFF

I thought I looked like a big giant, and everyone was laughing at me," she says. ``Someday I'd like to be able to play really, really well. And then nobody will laugh at me."

When Stanley Petit-Martre, 12, lost a beloved aunt to cancer last fall, some kids made fun of him. Stanley didn't tell his parents, afraid the mockery would deepen their hurt. ``I knew they would cry about that," he says.

He thinks being able to play and perform might help.

``It's fun," he says quietly. ``And your parents might be watching. They might be proud of you."

Bernstein is already proud. ``These kids changed my life," he says.

``A lot of them have been through some really hard stuff, and they come with the biggest smiles on their faces, just so excited about playing music."