



Emotional **HEART**

RAA BAND STUDENTS FEEL CONNECTIONS
WATCHING STONEMAN DOUGLAS PERFORMERS

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There was total silence from Raa Middle School's advanced band students as they watched video footage of a concert at Carnegie Hall. Only the most accomplished musicians are invited to perform in the prestigious venue but it wasn't a famous artist that entranced these middle schoolers. Instead, the stage held 65 members of the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School Wind Symphony.

Stoneman Douglas was one of just six high schools chosen to perform at Carnegie Hall as part of the 2018 New York Wind Band Festival. The invitation had come before the Feb.14 shooting in which 17 students were killed, two of



Raa band students silently watch footage of the Stoneman Douglas Wind Symphony at Carnegie Hall. AMANDA THOMPSON

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them music students and one a member of the Wind Symphony. In the three weeks following the tragedy, the ensemble decided to go ahead with the performance.

The Raa students were clearly moved and so was their band director, Barbie Townsend. "I know Mr. Kaminsky, the Stoneman Douglas band director," she said. "When I was first setting out and didn't know what I was doing, he was the first one who grabbed me and told me what to do." At times, fighting back tears, Townsend explained to her band students that emotion is an integral part of the music making process and the Stoneman Douglas students provided an exceptional example.

"It's amazing, especially to play through all those different emotions they might be going through and still be able to put on such a musical performance. So on top of the right notes and the right rhythms and good tone and making sure your jaw is open and that we're playing the phrase correctly, we also have to think about why are we doing this."

To help make the point to her students, Townsend drew upon the words of pianist Karl Paulnack. While serving as the director of the Boston Conservatory's music division, he made a speech to the parents of incoming freshman.

He said "art is part of



Barbie Townsend leads her band students and asks them to consider, "Why are we doing this?"

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the human spirit, an unquenchable expression of who we are. It's not a luxury, a lavish thing that we fund from leftovers of our budgets, not a plaything or an amusement or a pass time. Music is a basic need of human survival. Music is one of the ways we make sense of our lives, one of the ways in which we express feelings when we have no words, a way for us to understand things with our hearts when we can't with our minds."

With that sentiment in the air, the students rehearsed several pieces of music while searching for a deeper message.

Townsend asked them to reflect on what each piece reminded them of and encouraged them to create a story around it, one that held personal significance. "Most of us aren't in this to become professional musicians, that's fine," Townsend said. "But we should still be able to attach and reach and find meaning in music because if all we're doing is playing notes and rhythms then we're not really making

music. We're making sound but it's not necessary music."

Eighth-graders Morgan Cerra and Alantis Austin understand this concept and they both feel a sympathetic connection to the students at Stoneman Douglas. Morgan said "just the fact that happened to a school very close to us, it makes us think is it going to happen here as well? Music can help you pull through something like that and it can help with how you feel."

Austin agreed and added "Music can help you get through hard situations like that and stay strong. As a musician, playing music is your way of expressing your feelings without using words."

This is exactly what Townsend is hoping her band students will take away from this teachable moment. "We want to be able to convey feeling with music, not only for ourselves but for other people. We have to ask 'where is the story, what is the point, where does music go, especially mu-

sic like ours that has no words?' Sometimes that is the most powerful music we can play. We have to make sure we understand that."

Townsend closed the class by reading the conclusion of Paulnack's speech to the freshman music majors. "Frankly, ladies and gentlemen, I expect you not only to master music; I expect you to save the planet. If there is a future wave of wellness on this planet, of harmony, of peace, of an end to war, of mutual understanding, of equality, of fairness, I don't expect it will come from a government, a military force or a corporation. If there is a future of peace for humankind, I expect it will come from the artists, because that's what we do."

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