



Lisa Pettit directs Deerlake orchestra students during the Winter Festival reception. AMANDA THOMPSON

Strings are their thing

Teacher strikes joyous note with Deerlake orchestra students

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Wearing concert black, six middle school students straighten their bow ties and smooth their dresses. Once settled, the ensemble tunes up their instruments and prepares to play.

The venue is unusual. It's not a concert hall or an auditorium, though the audience is no less enthusiastic. As the first chords ring out, the sound reverberates and fills City Hall, much to the delight of the Winter Festival Youth Art Exhibition guests.

The annual exhibition takes place in the City Hall Art Gallery and is a celebration of visual art programs in our schools. During the public reception event and awards announcements, guests are treated to a concert by local music students, highlighting our schools' performing arts programs as well.

Each year the artworks change and the ensembles do too. This year's young musicians represented the Deerlake Middle School orchestra program.

The program is in its 20th year and was the first middle school strings program in the district. For the past decade, Lisa Pettit has stood at its helm. As the chorus and orchestra director at Deerlake, and a violinist herself, Pettit is eager for her students to experience as many public performance opportunities as possible. "We play at every event we can so that people know what we're doing," she said.

One of the most recent innovations to Pettit's music programs is a weekly performance in the school's courtyard for the student body, faculty, and staff. The band, chorus, and orchestra students are all able to participate and the response has been inspiring.

"When we first started, I was concerned about my little orchestra kids because there are so many people in the courtyard," confessed Pettit. "But their peers were just really encouraging. They stood around and listened, they were dancing, they were clapping and cheering. It was a really good feeling to see that kind of support from the students who don't play music."

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Violist Madeline McNally plays next to cellist Luke Heller. Luke not only performed but also has artwork on display in the Winter Festival exhibition. AMANDA THOMPSON

Orchestra

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Pettit encourages a family atmosphere in her classes and that's largely due to her own upbringing. "I grew up singing with my mom. We didn't watch TV in my house, we made music." After what proved to be a fateful strings presentation in elementary school, Pettit realized that the violin was her instrument. "I went home and I said 'I have to do that.' I just knew it and it's been my life."

Teaching came naturally to Pettit and after earning a degree in music education from Florida State University, she completed additional music studies in Europe. She has performed as a freelance violinist in a variety of orchestras and while she enjoys performing, her true love is education. "I really think this was a calling, it's what I was meant to do. I can't even imagine doing anything else."

Sixth-grader Jaden Choi can tell. "I like how Mrs. Pettit enjoys teaching us and I learn a lot from her, lots of techniques and lots of songs. I enjoy her class a lot." Jaden plays the violin and he feels there's a definite benefit to participating in Pettit's orchestra program. "I

can be popular," he said. With the exception of one classmate, "all the other people in orchestra are seventh and eighth-graders, so I get to meet more people by being part of it."

Madeline McNally has been playing the viola since fifth grade. Now, as an eighth-grader, she constantly strives "to get better, work harder, and practice." She's confident that Pettit can help her accomplish those goals. "She's such a fun teacher. She's so easy going and she never makes me feel pressured. She's really patient with all of us."

Because of the nurturing environment fostered by Pettit, Madeline is able to connect to others using her performance skills. "I like sharing music because it's something that everyone can enjoy and everyone likes. Music is joyous and it's really fun to play."

Seventh-grade violinist Dane O'Rourke expressed similar sentiments and said he felt lucky to be part of Pettit's orchestra program. "It's really important because it teaches kids not only how to make music but how it's used in the world. It makes me so happy."

Pettit wants her students to feel supported and she works diligently to engage their parents as well. Many serve as volunteers and happily transport instruments to and from performances. School administrators, too, are invested

in Pettit's programs and they even perform alongside the students.

"For our winter concert, students are playing the string parts and the administrators will be playing toy instruments. Our principal is playing the toy trumpet and the assistant principals are playing a toy drum and a toy rattle," giggled Pettit. "In all aspects of what our administrators do, they advocate for the music programs at Deerlake."

That kind of commitment is important to a sustainable and successful program. Perhaps, even more, critical is an understanding of the art form's intrinsic value.

"Music education is important because music is important. Not because it makes you good at math, not because it helps you pay attention, but because it feeds your soul and it makes you human. If I can give kids the skills to perform and have that feeling and share that feeling with an audience, what greater job is there?"

Amanda Karioth Thompson is the Assistant Director for the Council on Culture & Arts. COCA is the capital area's umbrella agency for arts and culture (www.tallahasseearts.org).