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GUITAR CLASSES INTEREST A RANGE OF STUDENTS AT RAA MIDDLE SCHOOL



PHOTOS BY AMANDA THOMPSON
Students refine their guitar skills at Raa Middle School.



Zy'Ona Knight and her classmates follow along with Raa guitar teacher Josh Lessard.

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The “hair bands” of the 1980s gave us some of the most iconic anthems in the history of rock ‘n’ roll. These groups had a significant influence not only on music, culture and fashion, but also on untold millions of adolescents, including Josh Lessard, guitar teacher at Raa Middle School. As a teenager, Lessard was drawn into heavy metal by bands like Poison, Guns N’ Roses and Stryper, but it was the genre’s emphasis on guitar riffs that held his attention.

“The solo in ‘Sweet Child of Mine’ really encouraged me,” Lessard recalled. “I picked up my dad’s guitar and taught myself chords, and then my parents plugged me into lessons.” He was introduced to classical guitar soon afterward as part of the audition process for enrollment in an arts magnet high school. He began a more thorough exploration of classical guitar and thought, “I like this. I can rehearse, and my ears don’t ring afterward and I can play a piece all by myself, I don’t have to have a band.”

Lessard went on to study guitar in college and he delights in sharing the musical knowledge he has accumulated over his lifetime. In many ways, he has come full circle, as he currently teaches at Raa, an arts magnet school. Students can choose from a number of arts offerings. Lessard shared: “I love that we can fit the students’ personalities with so many different electives. Some students that thrive in band, try guitar

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Guitar class

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and it's just not for them. Or they failed miserably in one of the other music classes but they come to guitar and it just fits their personality."

In his seven years on the faculty, Lessard has had the opportunity to try a few things himself. Though he originally was brought on to lead Raa's orchestra program, over the years, students demonstrated enough of an interest in guitar that he could dedicate his focus to building a comprehensive curriculum. He now teaches two advanced and two beginning classes as well as an exploratory class for sixth-graders. The total enrollment for his classes amounts to more than 100 students.

Eighth-grader Zy'Ona Knight has been taking guitar classes from Lessard for the past three years. She enjoys the challenge of the advanced program, especially sight-reading, a difficult exercise of performing an unfamiliar song directly from the sheet music without any preparation. "I'm a very, very fast learner and I've always been able to figure something out really quickly," Zy'Ona said. "When I have to play certain rhythms and different syncopations, I have to calculate that correctly so I know when to come in. It's a very complicated thing but I know I can do it. I have the confidence in myself and I can continue getting better and better at it because of these classes."

Elijah Powell has also enjoyed his three years of guitar instruction at Raa. As an eighth-grader, he is in his second year in the advanced program. He enjoys the constant variation that's part of Lessard's teaching philosophy. "We do new stuff every day," Elijah said. In one class period, students worked on four very different pieces of music: "Nowhere Man" by The Beatles, "Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring" by Bach, "Crazy Train" by Ozzy Osbourne, and Pachelbel's Canon in D. Though he's partial to rock, Elijah recognizes that "you can basically play anything on the guitar and you never really get bored."

Also, an eighth-grader and second-year advanced guitar student, Sarah Brock has been able to expand her musical capabilities through Lessard's instruction. "I can sing and play at the same time. That has really helped me to come out of my shell." When reflecting on music's transformative power, Sarah shared that "there's a lot of things you can do with music, it creates a lot of emotions for people. It doesn't just benefit you, it can benefit a lot of people and that's what I like about it."

Lessard agrees and often contemplates how music can be used in service, a prominent theme in his role outside of school as a rabbi. It's no coincidence that the word rabbi literally means teacher in Hebrew and



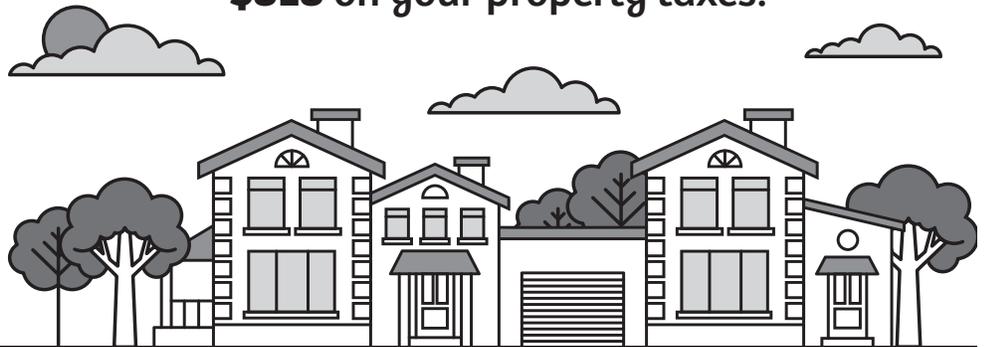
Lessard explores the intersection of these two important facets of his life. "One of my goals as a rabbi and as a music teacher is to get ourselves to where we're

concerned with the other, with relationships and people and how they're feeling. There's nothing wrong with making ourselves happy, there's nothing wrong with playing music because it soothes us and makes us feel better but to get to that point where we're so filled up ourselves that we can give it out to others is a goal. It's that sense of empathy and that sense of love that brings enjoyment."

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

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