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LEARNING HOW 'MUSIC IS BORN'

SEALEY TEACHER HAS BEEN TOUCHING LIVES WITH MUSIC FOR 30 YEARS

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Imagine that every seat in Ruby Diamond Concert Hall is occupied by a child. Now triple that and you'd begin to get a sense of how many young lives music teacher Blair Clawson has touched in his 30 years at Sealey Elementary School.

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PHOTOS BY AMANDA THOMPSON

TOP: Blair Clawson teaches students that a round is a type of canon or a piece of the same music starting at different times. ABOVE: Engaged music students at Sealey Elementary School.

Sealey

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More than 3,500 students have made their way through his classroom and Clawson said, "even after all these years, I love coming to work and teaching kids to be musicians."

Though times have changed and educational models have come and gone, Clawson stays true to his overarching teaching philosophy of providing his students with the building blocks for a life-long love of music. "I want to give them the tools where they can be successful at whatever they decide to try, whether it's a Celtic group, a folk group, a rock group, a church group, whatever."

Clawson has found that one of the best ways to support his emerging musicians is to provide a balance between individual and group learning experiences. And it doesn't hurt if they're fun. "When you get a game and everybody is playing it in synch in the classroom, everyone finds communal joy there and you're developing your own talents individually as well."

While encouraging his students' sense of play and exploration, Clawson stresses that scholarship is an important part of artistic development that helps to set up inquisitive habits for study and a growth mindset. "I try to put an emphasis on having a classroom environment that is supportive, it's rigorous but not critical in the negative sense, it's critical in the academic sense."

"We have a sequential, structured, scaffolded curriculum, that grows year by year just like any other subject areas does. There is a body of knowledge and a set of skills that pertain to music. It's like speaking a foreign language where you can have subtleties, nuances, and inflections in the music that are not verbal but are still powerful and communicative."

His students feel that power and are delighted to discover another way to express themselves. Third-grader Khe-rington Smith enjoys being able to use her voice and movements to communicate and she believes that "songs help you share your feelings." Her friend Dallas Robinson said that singing "in different ways makes me feel like I'm

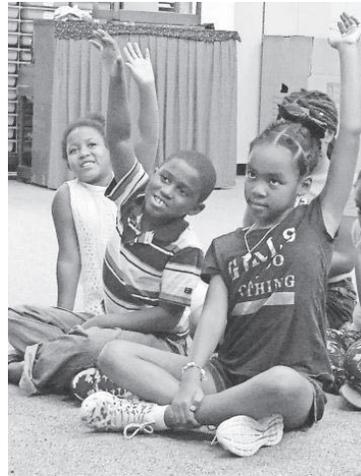


PHOTOS BY AMANDA THOMPSON

Blair Clawson provides a balance between individual and group learning experiences.



Blair Clawson uses hand movements that correspond to the solfège syllables.



Sealey third-graders have answers for music teacher Blair Clawson's questions.



having a moment."

When reflecting on what he learns from Clawson, Dallas added, "the thing about music class is it teaches you how music is born." Dallas' friend Tarie Wise feels that studying music allows him to connect to his peers and though he has musical aspirations for the future, they aren't yet clear. "I'm waiting to learn more and then I'll be able to pick out what I want to do."

That's exactly what Clawson hopes

to build for his students, a path towards whatever comes next. Though he can proudly cite examples of students who have gone on to earn advanced degrees in performance and others who have toured as singers with internationally recognized hip-hop artists, Clawson is steadfast on one point. "My goal is not

to have virtuosi or super talented professional musicians, it's to have everyone realize that they can use that musicianship and as a foundation for their self-esteem in knowing that they're a competent and capable person."

To qualify for that designation, Clawson insists that his students develop a capacity for compassion as well as creativity.

He encourages collaboration in his classroom and nurtures expressions of kindness and care for one another, not only within the confines of the school but globally as well.

"One of the things that music does so beautifully, as we sing songs from different cultures, and as we sing with people from different cultures, we learn that they're human beings just like us who value beauty and don't like pain. As we come to know them through their music, there is more trust and less antagonism and, at times, hatred that you see manifested in our world today. The arts teach us to feel and to listen and to open our minds and our hearts to new sounds, new ideas, new ways of working. When the arts do that, we're much better prepared to be a good citizen of the world."

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).