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Unique Method Teaches Local Children Music through Immersion

By Jennifer Wake



Xiomara Di Maio works with student Chase Severson, 9, on piano while Ian Shields accompanies on percussion. Photo Jennifer Wake

Music is a natural element in the lives of millions in the world. In the United States, however, music for many families has become as natural as the polycarbonate CDs upon which it is recorded. Music teachers Xiomara Di Maio and Ian Shields are working to change that at The Di Maio-Shields Music Studio in Lafayette.

For Shields and Di Maio, music is part of life. "Music is not a hobby," Di Maio says. "It's part of everything."

Both experienced professional musicians, Di Maio and Shields teach the Suzuki method of music. The Di Maio-Shields studio focuses on developing students' mu-

sical ear, before teaching them the rudimentary skill of reading music.

According to the International Suzuki Association, the Suzuki Method is based on the principle that all children possess ability and that this ability can be developed and enhanced through a nurturing environment. "All children learn to speak their own language with relative ease and if the same natural learning process is applied in teaching other skills, these can be acquired as successfully," it states on its Web site.

Katherine Austin of Orinda, who has taught the Suzuki method for nearly 20 years, says, "Dr. Suzuki's contribution to the world

of music has been monumental because he has shown us a way – almost a Zen-like path – to develop each child's natural talent for expressive, eloquent, fluent and musical playing."

Lafayette resident Pam Severson's 9 year old son, Chase, has been working with Di Maio and Shields for the past three years, and now plays piano with ease. Even Severson's four year old daughter Kelsey is drawn to the piano. "It's very interesting. Every once in a while she'll go to the piano to tinker," Severson says. "When she hits the right note, it 'clicks' and she gets so excited."

"Sibling participation is important," Di Maio says. "They are also part of the learning process."

Like other families who participate in the Suzuki method, Severson's family listens to tapes all the time to facilitate interest and learning.

In addition to individual lessons, which are piggy-backed so students support each other, Di Maio and Shields facilitate group sessions and have guest artists such as Stanley School's Bob Athayde on Jazz Piano, master Latin percussionist/bandleader John Santos, and other luminaries who visit, teach, and inspire the kids.

"We're like the world's smallest music conservatory," Shields says.

Richelle McClain's 14 year old daughter Simone (who attends Bentley) has been going to the Di Maio-Shields Studio for the past 10 years. In addition to playing piano, she also plays the guitar.

"The method is very holistic," McClain says. "Because sound is so important, you listen to the tapes to develop vocabulary and syntax for how music is developed. Simone hears music in a much different way than I do."

"What we're doing is training the ear from the beginning," Di Maio says. "Sound before reading, sound before writing. We work on posture, back, feet; it's a beautiful sound they're going for. What happens in a performance is they are thinking ahead. They know what's coming and they play the music, rather than the notes."

"I majored in piano in college and I'm still nervous about performing," McClain says. "And after all my training, I could not play by ear. Simone is just comfortable. When she was seven, she started bringing a guitar to piano lessons. She now plays piano and guitar by ear."

"The confidence factor is so amazing," Severson says. "That's something I never thought would translate."

"What's great is the fact that they want to perform and play," said Lafayette resident Danielle Gallagher, whose 9 year old daughter Claire has been coming to the studio for the past three years.

For Shields and Di Maio, it's not about talent – a word Shields hates and believes is a barrier – it's about doing.

Their goal is simple: "I want them to love it," Di Maio says. "And to learn that music is a beautiful process."

Troubling Students' Sleep Habits Spark "Back to Sleep" Campaign

By Jennifer Wake

Years back it was a punishment to be sent to your room. But Orinda "sleep guru" Robert deStefano says with computers, TVs, cell phones, and video streams on iPods, bedrooms have become a "jungle of connectivity" and, consequently, stimulation.

"It's a perfect storm of sleep-robbing factors, the least of which are the demands of our high-performance culture and perhaps more significantly our growing inability and lack of desire to unplug," deStefano says. "Eleven and twelve year olds are hooked into endless IM, MySpace and Facebook conversations. Kids as young as nine or ten go to sleep with their cell phones in

fear of missing a text."

According to the National Sleep Foundation, children ages 5 to 12 should get between 10 to 12 hours of sleep each night. Yet a report in the Journal of School Health states studies show school age children are averaging seven hours of sleep or less.

A former insomniac who taught himself techniques to break the cycle of insomnia nearly 10 years ago, deStefano hopes to entrain self-sleep skills at an early age for local students to use later in life.

"The 'now' benefits are huge," this father of two Miramonte students says. "Under-sleeping in kids is directly linked to child obe-

sity and diabetes, bad behavior and lower grades than those kids who get nine to eleven hours [of sleep]."

While tactics vary depending on the age of the child, deStefano says the strategy is consistent: employ transitional devices.

"Same as with adults, the children's bedroom needs to be the place that is focused on rest and sleep," he says. "And just like anything else, boundaries and rules are critical to a positive result."

DeStefano is planning several workshops, which will focus on promoting sleep music, lighting, aroma therapy and sleep-friendly room design, as well as the establishment of fun and effective pre-bed sleep ritu-

als to release stress, calm and promote deeper sleep. The parent training classes, which are open to the public, will be held at 11 a.m. on Sept. 23, 29, and Oct. 5 at the Oakwood Athletic Club (advance registration required by calling 283-4000 and asking for the activities desk). Additional classes will be offered at the Orinda Community Center in the future.

"As a nation, we're raising generations of chronic insomniacs," he says. "At some point we have to draw the line in the sand, and for me that time is now."

For more information, you can visit deStefano's Web site: www.learn2sleep.co.

Turf Supreme with Trimec Used on Sports Fields: Is The AUHSD Putting Children At Risk?

By Sophie Braccini

During the summer of 2009, the Acalanes Union High School District (AUHSD) dispersed on the Campolindo fields a product called Turf Supreme 16-6-8 plus Trimec. The District used what it calls a fertilizer that includes an herbicide with low level toxicity to remove clover (clover is linked to ankle and knee injury according to the District). Parents for a Safer Environment (PfSE) says research shows the product's active ingredients have health risks including potentially putting adolescents at risk for cancer later in life.

Although District administrators and PfSE reached an agreement a year ago to reduce the use of pesticides in the District, they continue to disagree about what is "safe" to use.

During the public comment period of the Sept. 9 AUHSD Board meeting, parents lined up to express their concerns about the usage of Turf Supreme over the summer, as well as the list of chemicals that will be used by the district in the future.

"Parents were not informed

of the use of Turf Supreme this summer, and many groups and teams practice on those fields," said Carol Shenon, a Campolindo parent.

"We do not have to send notices when school is out," AUHSD Associate Superintendent Chris Learned answered, "but we posted notices on the field as requested by law. According to the information I researched, this product has a low level of toxicity. The safety of the children is our first priority and we would never have used that product if we thought it posed a risk to their well being." Learned also noted that following the Sept. 8, 2009, verbal agreement with PfSE the District stopped using the three most dangerous products PfSE had identified.

The parents remain unconvinced. "Turf Supreme contains one chemical that is a known reproductive/developmental toxin and another that is a possible carcinogen and a suspected endocrine disruptor (a toxin that interferes with the hormonal systems of humans)," Shenon said.

"We have seen in the past that products that we felt were safe are discovered years later to be a major risk," added PfSE director Susan JunFish. "Adolescents are very vulnerable to endocrine disruptors that are attacking their developing hormone systems. We do not want to make the same mistake and discover in twenty years that we put our sons and daughters at risk for hormone-related cancers because we wanted to prevent ankle injury."

Shenon does not want to antagonize the District. "I don't want this to be confrontational," she said. "We can learn from our mistakes and work together to draft a policy that keeps students safe, will allow parents to stay informed, and if the administration changes, we will feel confident that the pesticide use rules won't."

Learned said that possible adoption of an Integrated Pest Management (IPM) policy will be discussed at by the AUHSD Board at its early November meeting. He added that the District is favorable to reasonable

and practical solutions that take into account the District's limited resources.



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