

Published December 31st, 2014

## Lafayette Resident Offers Young Children the Gift of Music

By Diane Claytor



Xiomara Di Maio works with preschoolers on musical skills at Happy Days Learning Center in Lafayette. Photos Diane Claytor

"Music is a more potent instrument than any other for education." So said Plato, the famous Greek philosopher. Many studies looking at the relationship between music and brain development in young children concur, noting that early exposure to music increases abilities in other areas, including math and language. Xiomara Di Maio, Lafayette resident and owner of the Lamorinda School of Musical Arts (SOMA), couldn't agree more. And she practices this belief every day. "Kids need music, not only to develop intellectually," Di Maio said, "but to learn to express themselves, to survive in this busy world. They need the simplicity of making music."

Di Maio, a native of Venezuela, became immersed in music at the young age of 5. She began taking piano lessons, singing with children's choirs and, as she got older, attending the Conservatory of Music every day. She left home at age 20 to attend Indiana University, where she

earned her B.A. in music and her master's degree in choral conducting.

Having taught music to young children while living in Venezuela, Di Maio learned that the "playful aspects of learning" work best, especially with young children. "They need to play, need to be themselves," she noted. And she learned that teaching children to sing is what she enjoys most.

Moving to San Diego in the late '80s, Di Maio studied the Suzuki method of teaching, where the goal is to embrace the whole child, nurture a love of music and develop character rather than just mastering a musical instrument. While in San Diego, Di Maio created her own adult vocal ensemble, singing chamber music devoted to the Latin American repertoire. In addition to maintaining her teaching studio, she continued to perform on piano and percussion instruments.

Coming to Lafayette in 1998, she "found her treasure in meeting Bob Athayde (Stanley Middle Schools' director of music education). He opened so many doors for me," Di Maio said. The following year, believing that "each child has the ability to learn music," she founded SOMA and opened her home studio. The passion Di Maio has for music is evident. Two pianos fill her living room; they are flanked on one side with a wall of shelves filled with what appears to be hundreds of CDs, and on the other, a wall of shelves holding files and files of sheet music.

Di Maio, soft-spoken and nurturing, offers a music curriculum that "helps develop young minds by exploring sound through singing, moving, listening and playing instruments." She teaches private piano and vocal lessons as well as group classes. "I want kids to love playing the piano, love singing," she explained. "I want them to come here and be happy." She even encourages her students to bring other instruments they like and is happy to accompany them on the piano while they play their guitar or saxophone.

This year, Di Maio added Child's Play, a program for kids as young as 8 months. The curriculum, using live rather than recorded music, is based on traditional and folk music, chanting rhymes and singing games. Classes are taught both in her studio and in several local preschools and are also offered in Spanish.

"I believe it's important to start the musical journey when children are very young," Di Maio said. And she embraces a holistic journey, working with both sides of the brain - "exposing them, embracing them, giving them the opportunity to learn. Singing together gives them confidence,

moving together gives them security, opens them up emotionally and intellectually." It's also Di Maio's belief that beginning the musical education early encourages creativity and imagination as well as physical coordination, memory and accuracy. "It makes you such a different person," she exclaimed. "This is something that I have loved since I was a very young child and music, the universal language, is what keeps me in touch with this wonderful world."

According to [Childrensmusicworkshop.com](http://Childrensmusicworkshop.com), "Music is for life. Most people can't play soccer, or football at 70 or 80 years of age but they can sing. And they can play piano or some other instrument. Music is a gift you can give your child that will last their entire lives."

Di Maio totally agrees.



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