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The real life of an LPIE instructor

By Sharon K. Sobotta



Laura Zucker Photo courtesy Laura Zucker

Laura Zucker still remembers leaving her law practice behind in Connecticut to embark on a fresh start in Lafayette with her partner and three children nearly two decades ago. It didn't turn out like she imagined it.

"My partner left me and suddenly, I found myself (to be) a single mom of three little kids in a place where I couldn't practice law and had no means of income," Zucker remembers with a bittersweet smile. "But I still had my guitar."

Zucker grew up in a music loving family, with a mom who sang opera and a dad who worked at a radio station and appreciated music even if singing wasn't his forte. She'd dabbled in music as a kid and in college, but it wasn't until 2006 that she really leaned into the beginnings of her identity as a musician. "I started going into classrooms and singing 'The Wheels on the Bus' and all sorts of children's songs. And one day, a(n) original) song popped out of me and I was (awestruck)," Zucker says. "I started writing songs. It was really easy to access my emotions (through music) because they were so close to the surface."

Zucker then joined the West Coast Songwriters Association and then filled the open nooks and crannies of her life (not occupied by child rearing responsibilities) with open mics and musical gigs. Zucker released her

first record in 2007. A few years later, Zucker started sowing the seeds for the next generation of potential musicians as a Lafayette Partners in Education (LPIE) instructor in the Lafayette School District.

Today, with six original albums under her belt and hundreds of youth that she's crossed paths with as a music (and in some cases, a substitute) teacher, Zucker says she can only hope she's making a small difference. "I want the kids to know that I have a really big life and that they are a part of my big life. I want them to know they are important," Zucker says. "There is something so rewarding about helping a child (who might otherwise be unsure of themselves) master an instrument and become proud."

Zucker has just released her latest album "Lifeline," which she says is a story of the last five years which encapsulates the time of the pandemic. "A lifeline is something we grab hold of. It keeps us from drowning. It's something that carries us forward or something that trails behind us for someone else to grab hold of. Sometimes we lead, sometimes we follow and sometimes we do both. There are multiple lifelines all woven together into a beautiful tapestry," Zucker explains with an ear-to-ear smile. "That's what this record is all about. It's about our life, our world. It's beautiful and it's written from my perspective as a nearly 65-year-old woman."

It's perhaps not surprising that the Lafayette School District is proud to have people like Laura Zucker, affectionately known as Mrs. Z by her students, in the mix as part of the infamous LPIE program. What Zucker thinks might be slightly surprising to parents and community members, however, is that she and many of her LPIE colleagues in the music program are not earning what they believe would be a fair wage in this community. Zucker explained that music classes in some of the elementary schools are taught in 30-minute blocks. There isn't built-in prep, warm up or commuting time. This means that a teaching musical artist, who is compensated at the rate of \$30 an hour, typically earns \$15 for a given class. "By the time you factor in the commute, the gas, the driving time, it's hard to justify the pay."

Zucker and some of her LPIE colleagues have raised this issue to the superintendent and are awaiting further discussions this month. In terms of what would be fair or reasonable, Zucker says she'd love to see LPIE instructors (who are often freelancing artists who don't necessarily receive benefits) receive \$50 an hour and have a one-hour minimum. "LPIE is an important and lucrative program and I think it's important for parents and community members who contribute to know where the money is (or isn't) being spent. It's important to take care of those, who are doing this important work, who in many cases happen to be women."

In a written response to Lamorinda Weekly, Lafayette Superintendent Brent Stephens explains that the district highly values its decades-long relationship with LPIE instructors who provide supplemental art, music, science, world language and social studies instruction to the students. "(We're) committed to fair,

competitive and equitable compensation for all our employees," Stephens writes. Although LPIE instructors are not a part of the two unions, whose compensation packages will be reviewed in spring, the district will be exploring LPIE compensation rates simultaneously. "We will be exploring compensation rates for LPIE instructors, who are not a part of the union but who are equally important to our students and families. We look forward to working collaboratively with all our employees on this process."

Regarding the frustration that Zucker says some music teachers experience when offered half-hour shifts, Stephens reiterated that LPIE staff are paid an hourly wage like all hourly employees but stopped short of commenting on alternatives like one-hour minimum shifts. Stephens says, however, that the Lafayette School District is committed to continuing to engage with the LPIE team through regular Zoom meetings not only to discuss pay, but also to get feedback and identify other issues that may also need to be discussed.

To learn more about Zucker's music, visit www.laurazucker.com.

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