

Greece teacher helps make music fun

DAN GROSS

As parents support kids at home for upcoming holiday shows across the area, music instructors are hard at work, rehearsing students in concert bands, orchestras, jazz ensembles and choirs. Meet instructor Robert Bickford of Greece's Buckman Heights Elementary School, which is preparing for its winter performance.

Last summer, the school's fifth-grade jazz ensemble became the youngest group ever to play at the Xerox Rochester International Jazz Fest. Members performed music from memory in a variety of tunes and styles, while taking on both prepared and improvised solos. And standing before them was a young man, who from a distance looks like he couldn't be older than 20-something. He was calm and focused.

"Mr. Bickford is an amazing band teacher," said Natalie Bentley, 11, now in sixth grade at Greece Olympia. "He knows how to make learning fun, and he was my inspiration to learn how to play the drums. He helped me to build my confidence. Jazz fest was awesome to be the youngest performers to perform in a festival with professional jazz bands."

Bickford, who is actually 32, was on the receiving end of every parent's praise. But in his own self-effacing way, he credits others, not himself.

"Greece has an excellent music department that employs a host of talented educators," Bickford said. "We actually just won the NAMM Foundation 2015 award for one of the best communities for music education." According to its website, the National Association of Music Merchants Foundation unites nonprofits, schools and businesses working to assure that music education is supported in communities everywhere.

Bickford, in what he calls a "circuitous path" to Rochester, grew up in Colebrook, Connecticut.

He began playing trumpet in fourth grade, and eventually went on to study music education at the University of New Hampshire. There, he met his future wife, a French horn player who was going to attend Eastman School of Music for her master's, and Bickford moved with her.

He began his Rochester teaching career subbing in city schools, eventually landing a job at Buckman Heights as a general music teacher for the third, fourth, and fifth grades, where he stayed for three years. He was promoted to the instrumental teacher for the fourth and fifth grades; he now directs the fourth and fifth-grade concert band; fifth-grade concert band; and fifth-grade jazz ensemble. In addition, he supervises some after-school clubs, which he treats as "group practice sessions."

Over the past six years while on the job, he graduated from Eastman in 2011, earning his master's in music education. What makes Bickford unique is not only his end result, but his path and teaching methods.

"I've been really inspired by a couple people," Bickford said. "Dr. Azara at Eastman was a big influence, as was Dr. Alexander, the previous instrumental teacher here at Buckman Heights. (She) really introduced me to the idea of teaching music like a language."

He describes the first time he walked past Alexander's rehearsal room, thinking it was a high school band playing at an elementary school.

"You don't learn a language first by reading and writing it," Bickford said. "You learn by hearing and

listening to it. Eventually, you pick up little pieces, and incorporate them in your own speech. Then you start to read and write. This is the same thing in music, including the extrinsic or emotional qualities of the music, as well as the intrinsic parts — the technique.”

Most of Bickford’s approach stems from this concept. Both he and his students learn their parts and the main melody by singing through them first. Eventually, they are aware not only of their own parts, but also everyone else’s parts, and they have memorized their own parts because the music has been internalized.

In addition to singing, composition is a large part of what he does at the school. “Everyone composes in here,” Bickford said. Kids bring in an assignment, and they sing through it and play it with Bickford. They even form small groups to play it in, and at the end of the spring semester, Bickford hosts a composition concert in which the students can play their own works for an audience.

“Composition and soloing are hard,” Bickford said. “You have to take baby steps, and react to your student. Once they master the basics, they feel so comfortable; we eventually don’t have time for all the soloists and compositions.” Bickford always strives to balance the right amount of slack and direction with his students, so they can feel accomplished and take ownership of what they do.

Bickford’s goal for the students is to create a strong, lifelong relationship with music. He wants them to be able to hear something on the radio and play it with their friends. When asked how he feels seeing his first students, who are still in high school, having such great success, he replied, “It’s odd, but wonderful.”

Bickford and Buckman Heights will be having their holiday concerts at 7 p.m. Jan. 11 at Greece Odyssey High School. The fifth-grade concert band, the orchestra, the choir and the fifth-grade jazz ensemble will perform. The jazz ensemble will only be playing one winter-themed piece, an arrangement of “We Three Kings” called “The Kings of Swing.”

Dan Gross is a freelance writer and musician who contributes community content on music. The story also includes reporting by Ryan Miller.



Robert Bickford, 32, is an instrumental teacher at Buckman Heights Elementary School.

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Students rehearse at Buckman Heights in Greece. The rhythm section is in the pocket playing an arrangement of “We Three Kings” called “Kings of Swing.”

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