

Broad Street Elementary hosts pianist in celebration of new sound system, piano

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Pianist Adam Swanson smiles after finishing a song on the piano at Broad Street Elementary School on Friday, Sept. 19, 2025. Sol McCormick/Butler Eagle

The Broad Street Elementary School community was treated to ragtime, jazz, blues and more on the piano Friday morning, Sept. 19, in celebration of the school receiving a piano and sound system from a nonprofit.

Students and educators gathered in the school's gym at 9:30 a.m., where principal Vanessa Boyd introduced them to pianist Adam Swanson, alongside Ben Robertson and Jason Wiles from Blackwood Arts. She explained to the students that Blackwood Arts helped the school receive a sound system and a piano at no cost.

"Mr. Ben and Mr. Jason and Blackwood Arts was able to raise \$10,000 for us," Boyd told her students.

After the school thanked Robertson and Wiles, Swanson took the stage to introduce the students to the genre of ragtime and play "Maple Leaf Rag" by Scott Joplin.

“Many people do not realize that ragtime is the first truly original American music,” he said. “It started in the 1890s. We’re talking over 125 years ago.”

Swanson explained that ragtime was not played solely on piano, but used different instruments and even incorporated singing. He performed a second example of ragtime with “Calico Rag” by Nat Johnson.

“The thing I want you to remember about this is that all American music came from ragtime in one way or another. Have you heard of blues? Have you heard of jazz? Have you heard of rock ‘n’ roll? Well, it all came from ragtime,” he said.

He then began to take the students on a journey through the evolution of early music, from early jazz with “Tiger Rag” by Original Dixieland Jazz Band to early blues and boogie-woogie with “St. Louis Blues” by W.C. Handy.

He ended off with “Razor Blades” by Tom Brier, a contemporary ragtime piece composed in 1994, before taking questions from the students. They asked him how he could play without sheet music or looking at his hands and he shared a lesson: practice makes perfect.

After the concert, Boyd encouraged her students to remember this as both an educational and fun opportunity.

“This was art. This was math. This was science, engineering. All types of stuff happened here today,” she said.

After students returned to class, she told Wiles and Robertson that she was overjoyed by the fact students asked questions and found their own ways of understanding the music.

“They were connecting their world to this world. So they were hearing things, they can’t understand why, but they’re hearing these things from YouTube and from cartoons. Three other children asked me about that,” she said.

Boyd first met with Blackwood Arts in March at a luncheon and tour it hosted. There, she told the nonprofit’s leaders the school needed a sound system, as only those in the front rows in the audience could hear performances.

“It was a beautiful opportunity that turned into what I felt was kindred spirits connecting and it was marvelous,” she said about the luncheon.

Afterward, Robertson and Wiles visited the school. Wiles volunteered to contribute speakers for the project and install them at no cost. Funds for additional equipment, such as microphones and mixers, were raised by patrons of the society.

During their visit, the two noticed the school lacked a piano, so they began to search for one. Joel Cluskey, president of the Pittsburgh Chapter of the Piano Technicians Guild, contacted Blackwood to donate and deliver a piano at no cost.

Both the piano and sound system were brought into the school in late August, just in time for the beginning of the new school year.

Robertson, the founder of Blackwood Arts, said the reason the organization hosts luncheons and field trips is toward its mission of introducing music to children.

“The earlier the better, because they become better at learning different subjects. They become better at being socialized, because when you start learning to play an instrument, you’re playing with a group,” he said.

Wiles and Robertson listed numerous other benefits music education have, such as better grades, teaching discipline and giving children another voice to express themselves.

But one benefit everyone agreed on was that giving younger generations exposure to classic music will keep it alive for more to enjoy.

“I know a lot of organizations around the country that teach music ... Blackwood is the only one that really focuses on exposing kids to this, which is just fantastic,” Swanson said.



Pianist Adam Swanson plays a ragtime song on the piano for students of Broad Street Elementary School on Friday, Sept. 19, 2025. Sol McCormick/Butler Eagle



Jason Wiles, left, and Ben Robertson flank Broad Street Elementary School principal Vanessa Boyd as she tells students about the new sound system and piano at a concert Friday, Sept. 19, 2025. Sol McCormick/Butler Eagle

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