

Students learn guitar free, thanks to Harrisville nonprofit

Paula Grubbs Eagle Community Editor

🕒 October 10, 2023 Last Updated: October 09, 2023 07:38 PM 📁 Community



Roger Angert, 10, works with guitar instructor Caleb Novak on Saturday morning during the first day of the “Graeme's Kids” program at Swope Hall on the Slippery Rock University campus. Shane Potter/Butler Eagle

SLIPPERY ROCK — There’s no need to fret for 10 plucky Butler Area School District students interested in learning to play the guitar, thanks to the nonprofit organization Blackwood Arts.

The first of the students’ six free weekly lessons was held Saturday morning at Slippery Rock University’s Swope Music Hall under the fun and able instruction of Caleb Novak.

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Jay Stollman, who sits on the board of directors at the Harrisville nonprofit, said Shelly Oesterling-Smith, a longtime supporter of Blackwood Arts, donated her late husband Graeme's two guitars after he died a year ago of a rare form of cancer.

At about the same time, Stollman was trying to formulate a way to expand Blackwood Arts' musical outreach in the community.

Matching guitars with students

So Stollman and others at the nonprofit came up with the idea of "Graeme's Kids," which would be a group lesson using donated guitars aimed at students at Center Township Elementary School and Butler Intermediate High School.

The idea became a reality Saturday morning, when the first lesson was held.

"It started with Shelly and the guitars," Stollman said.

He said he took the donated guitars to a music shop in Barkeyville, and when the owner there heard about the way the instruments were to be used, he refurbished and donated several guitars that were languishing at the shop.

Stollman's friend Andy Johnson procured guitars, cases and other accessories for the program as well.

Thanks to the generosity of those individuals, students don't have to buy a guitar or anything else to participate in the program and can take the instruments home to practice during the week.

Center Township Elementary became involved after the school district's director of curriculum brought the Center Township principal to a Butler County Tourism & Convention Bureau function at the unique Blackwood Arts property for a tour and demonstration.

"They loved what they saw and wanted to be connected (with Blackwood Arts) in some way," Stollman said.

He said the original plan was to open the program to the public, but Center Township and Intermediate High students were so interested in learning the guitar, they quickly filled all 10 spots.

Using a phrase from her late husband's homeland of England, Oesterling-Smith said Graeme would be "properly chuffed" at the program named for him.

She attended the inaugural lesson Saturday morning and FaceTimed her in-laws in the U.K. to show them the program.

"They were overwhelmed," Oesterling-Smith said.

'He loved playing the guitar'

She said the idea to honor her husband's memory by sharing his love of the guitar with young people is perfect.

“He loved playing guitar,” Oesterling-Smith said. “He would have loved this and thought it was the greatest thing.”

When she heard about the program, she did not expect it to be so expansive.

“It’s really special knowing how many people worked on it and the community involvement,” Oesterling-Smith said.

Slippery Rock University, a grant from the Friends of the Bantam Jeep Association and the patrons of Blackwood Arts also made the program possible.

Alana Ehrman, 11, a fifth grader at Center Township, plays the clarinet in the school band, but had been thinking about learning to play the guitar for a few months.

She was surprised to learn guitar players must build up calluses on their fingertips that push the strings down on the neck of the guitar.

“I think it’s fun and cool to play the guitar,” Alana said.

Her classmate Emma M. Garrido, 10, also plays clarinet in the school band.

“I have a couple guitars at my house, and I kind of play around with them, but I came here so I can actually learn to play them,” Emma said.

She said learning any instrument is good for young people in many ways.

“I think it’s good for kids, because it helps them interact with music and meet people and even make new friends,” Emma said.

She also said it is exciting to take lessons in a college classroom such as the one in SRU’s Swope Hall.

“Maybe I’ll go here after high school,” Emma said.

Ryder Cumblidge, 14, an eighth grader at the Intermediate school, sings in the school chorus, but had his first experience with instrumental lessons Saturday morning.

“I always found music very interesting,” said Ryder, who counts a drummer and trumpeter among his family members. “I just think music is really interesting to learn, especially guitar.”

He looks forward to learning the acoustic guitar so he can move on to the electric guitar, which he likes better.

“This is a really good program because it allows kids to learn guitar, and it’s pretty fun,” Ryder said.

Roger Angert, 10, a fifth grader at Center Township, has played piano since kindergarten and began playing cello last year.

“I just have always wanted to play guitar,” Roger said. “It comes to me easy because I already play the cello.”

The young musician is glad he signed up for the program.

“I took a chance when they announced it and just signed up,” Roger said. “I really like it.”

Holly Ehrman, who is Alana’s mother, said teachers sent an email home alerting parents they would be receiving more information on the program from the school’s music teacher.

Ehrman signed Alana up as soon as she could in the lottery program to fill the 10 spots.

“I knew she was interested,” she said.

A great learning experience

She said music is a great learning experience for kids.

“It’s relaxing, and it gives them a sort of therapy and fun way to make friends with common interests,” Ehrman said.

Stollman and Blackwood Arts CEO Ben Robertson said music is like learning another language and helps students in their regular studies.

“Music education improves brain power,” Stollman said.

“Parents don’t understand how much information kids are getting and absorbing at a young age (when they learn an instrument),” Robertson said.

Stollman said he asked Novak to serve as the instructor after witnessing his talent at a jazz performance in which Novak played.

“I’ve always loved Blackwood Arts’ willingness to support the arts,” Novak said. “The more I learn about them, the more glad I am they are in this area doing what they’re doing.”

Regarding the first group lesson Saturday, Novak said he was very pleased with the students who participated.

“I thought they did great,” he said. “They were super attentive, ready to listen and interested in what was going on.”

He said those who already play and quickly absorb the material will be given more challenging lessons as he works with those who are novices.

Given the obvious popularity of Graeme’s Kids, Stollman hopes to offer an intermediate-level guitar class as well as another beginners class after the current session ends.

Oesterling-Smith said she is thrilled with the program and knows her husband would be, too.

“His parents and I are just so grateful,” she said. “It’s a wonderful thing to come together and honor his life.”



The first group with the “Graeme's Kids” program came together Saturday at Swope Hall on the Slippery Rock University campus. Shane Potter/Butler Eagle



Ryder Cumblidge, 14, works with guitar instructor Caleb Novak on Saturday morning during the first day of the “Graeme's Kids” program at Swope Hall on the Slippery Rock University campus. Shane Potter/Butler Eagle



Alana Ehrman, 11, works with guitar instructor Caleb Novak on Saturday morning during the first day of the "Graeme's Kid" program at Swope Hall on the Slippery Rock University campus. Shane Potter/Butler Eagle



Emma M. Garrido, 10, works with guitar instructor Caleb Novak on Saturday morning during the first day of the "Graeme's Kids" program at Swope Hall on the Slippery Rock University campus. Shane Potter/Butler Eagle