



Started almost by chance, the Junior Appalachian Musicians program has spread far beyond its beginnings at Sparta Elementary School.

By David Schulman



PHOTOGRAPHY BY (OPPOSITE PAGE) HAINES, (THIS PAGE) DENISE CLAY

Through the Junior Appalachian Musicians program, students such as Sierra Todd have an opportunity to learn mandolin, dulcimer, banjo, fiddle, or guitar.



JAM Executive Director Helen White loves it when children pick up instruments and tap into their musical roots.

When the nurses started crying, Bonnie Hall wasn't surprised. Almost every time the program director of Sparta Elementary School's Junior Appalachian Musicians (JAM) program had accompanied students to entertain at nearby nursing homes, she had seen similar responses. Both caretakers and patients loved to hear the kids play those once almost-abandoned musical instruments. This time an elderly, immobile man joined in to sing as the group began to play "Amazing Grace." A nurse whispered to Hall, "He's been here for years, and this is the first time he has uttered a word."

A matter of serendipity

Some things are just meant to happen, but sometimes they take longer than we want. That is unless Helen White gets hold of the vision. "As a guidance counselor [of Alleghany County Schools for 18 years]," says White, "I have had a ringside seat on the less charming situations of mountain life — poverty, substance abuse, and domestic violence — so I knew that families of our children could benefit by being reconnected with their music."

It was early spring in 2000 when

White, an award-winning songwriter/composer and Fiddlers Grove champion fiddler, walked into a third-grade classroom where the music teacher was holding up pictures of stringed instruments. White volunteered to bring in actual instruments to the next class so the students could have a tactile feel of her family of strings: the mandolin, dulcimer, and old-time banjo, as well as fiddle and guitar.

Although once indigenous to the winding back roads populace, traditional mountain music has not fared well over the last decades and was fast becoming almost unknown to younger generations. With Celtic, Scottish, and Irish influences and roots going back to the Civil War, old-time music is differentiated from bluegrass in simple terms. "Bluegrass is considered performance music while old-time has no instrumental solos," says White, now executive director of JAM. "It is community based, with a square-dance and family gathering heritage — utilitarian music."

White watched from the back of the room the next day as a disabled child with generations of musicians in her family raised the bass fiddle and played crystal-clear notes. The child received a standing ovation from her peers, and

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Through this unique program, now expanded through eight western North Carolina counties, the old-time musical heritage and tradition is being carried to a new generation, including Chandler Caudill, far left, and Amber Jennings, far right.

White instantly knew this could be the beginning of much more than a one-time impromptu visit to a music class. What she didn't know was that she was kicking off a musical revival in the Old North State.

That same week, White attended a traditional mountain-music performance in neighboring Ashe County, where she bumped into Lucy Allen, then a folklorist for the Hiddenite Center. Allen was working on a Challenge America grant and leaving the next day for a Washington, D.C., funding conference. White's idea excited Allen, who loves to encourage a sense of pride in history and heritage in students, and Allen took the idea directly to the conference. Within days, White received an email from Terry Liu of the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) encouraging her to apply for possible grants to jump-start her dream.

White quickly gathered local visionaries to help her take advantage of the opportunity before her. Jean Sparks, former director of the Alleghany County Arts Council, had just been hired as administrator of the federal 21st Century After School program for the county. Already on her staff was talented singer LuJean Keeper (JAM's first director), who offered to pair with master guitarist Steve Kilby to teach one of the first classes. White, Keeper, and Sparks conducted impromptu hallway meetings between classes to come up with an appropriate name for the program, and soon Junior Appalachian Musicians was decided on. "You should have heard some of the other names," White, a smiling powerhouse in diminutive form, says with a wink.

Shortly after school dismissed for the summer, Sparks found surplus funding to buy instruments, and in August, just months after one girl bravely raised a lone fiddle and played some clear notes, the NEA approved more funding. In a few short months, White and the others had brought JAM into being, to the beat of the old-time mountain music.

Reaching the children

"JAM has turned out to be life changing, even lifesaving in several instances," White says. "Music is an attainable, cheap source of autonomy, fun, and community that some of these kids desperately need."

Sparta school principal Susan Murphy agrees: "JAM reaches kids not reached by other programs and has brought parents into the school who may not have been comfortable in the past."

The teaching element of JAM is not a simple process. Offered to students in third through eighth grades, JAM is not so much about learning to read music as it is learning to hear it. "An important distinguishing aspect of traditional Appalachian music is its history as an oral art form," reads the program guidebook. "Tunes are passed primarily by ear rather than the written page." The challenge has been to protect the "purity of old-time music while efficiently dealing with a variety of students of different learning aptitudes, interest, and learning styles."

Old-time music itself got a sustaining boost in the 1970s when Tommy Jarrell of Mount Airy became a major force. White describes him as a country gentleman who graciously accepted

counterculture "revivalist" musicians into the movement's warm fold — and in doing so extended its reach to new generations.

Musicians like Brad Leftwich, of Bloomington, Indiana, studied Jarrell and other masters of the form and documented bow styles and other distinguishing characteristics of the music tradition. Likewise Emily Spencer, a transplant to the Whitetop, Virginia, area, has been instrumental in passing along the banjo styles she studied in her early years. "It is ironic," says White, "that some of the 'adopters' may now prove central in returning music to the children of the culture. Many of the older master musicians have passed on without leaving a direct lineage in the communities they come from."

But through this program, the musical tradition is being carried on to a new generation. "[JAM] is a program that will allow our students to carry an important piece of mountain heritage on to the next generation," says Dr. Jeff Cox, superintendent of Alleghany County Schools.

Fifth grader Mason Reeves agrees. "My great-great-grandpa is Del Reeves [of the Grand Ole Opry]. JAM has given me a great opportunity to learn Appalachian music. Before the program started, a lot of kids didn't have anything to do after school. This is a way to learn something fun."

Let the music play on

Half a decade later, JAM, under the leadership of the North Carolina Arts Council, is now setting toes a-tappin' not only in Alleghany County but in Swain, Surrey, Ashe, Caldwell,

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Cherokee, Graham, and Haywood counties, too. Along the way, Alleghany has even found ways to get home-schooled children involved.

The challenge, however, has been finding and keeping quality teachers who have the time and training to make the program effective. When it comes to old-time music, “there is literally no such thing as a full-time music professional,” White says. “We all have to do different things.”

For example, Pasley has taught

banjo and fiddle for almost the whole time the program has been in existence, maintaining his day job as a high school English teacher. Kilby had recently retired to the area from Wilkes County when White nabbed him for the first guitar classes, and he still cherishes those memories. “We were fortunate the first few classes had very talented students who were interested in playing the music that had been handed down to the instructors by our elders. It’s a great

experience for both students and teachers.”

As the program grows, it becomes evident that music is not the only benefit. Tammy Sawyer, co-leader of the current JAM Band group and a dulcimer teacher, says, “There have been numerous studies that show children who play music are generally better students overall. Through the program they have to learn and work on responsibility, discipline, teamwork, confidence, self-esteem, self-control, and other social skills which will help them throughout their lives.”

Although dedication and love for old-time music have sustained the program through good times and bad, funding, of course, remains a perennial struggle. White credits the National Endowment for the Arts, the North Carolina Arts Council, and numerous corporate stars such as the John Pearce String Company and D’Addario Music Company for stepping up with desperately needed monies and supplies over the years.

“The rich, widespread musical traditions alive in North Carolina’s Appalachian counties have only begun to be tapped by current JAM programs,” says Sally Peterson, folklife specialist at the North Carolina Arts Council.

White’s biggest dream now is for major sustaining private funding to emerge. Perhaps it will be from someone who shares the rather simple ideal printed on the sticker on her fiddle case: “Music really does make the world a better place.”



David Schulman, who lives in Asheville, is the author of the novel, The Past is Never Dead, and is at work on a sequel.

to know more

To learn more about the Junior Appalachian Musicians, contact Helen White at 450 North Main Street, Sparta, N.C. 28675, or whiteha@alleghany.k12.nc.us.