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Rock 'N' Roll Call



Tribune photo by MICHAEL SPOONEYBARGER

Local music teachers get some expert help from David Wish, left, a former first-grade teacher who founded the Little Kids Rock program and created the curriculum in 2001. "The Tampa chapter is going to make a lot of mischief for a lot of years," he predicts.

By JOHN W. ALLMAN, The Tampa Tribune

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TAMPA - Mindy Rogers had an unexpected Oprah Winfrey moment Friday - only instead of a new car, she and other area music teachers received free electric guitars.

More than that, Rogers, a longtime Hillsborough County teacher, and her peers got a crash course in rock 'n' roll education courtesy of Little Kids Rock, a national music curriculum coming soon to local classrooms.

"I'm so thrilled about this," said Rogers, who teaches at Knights Elementary School in Plant City. "Out in the country, the rural children don't have the opportunity."

Little Kids Rock uses contemporary rock music to teach students from kindergarten through high school. Tampa's chapter is one of 15 scattered across 10 states.

For two days - Friday and Saturday - program founder Dave Wish led a hands-on seminar to educate the 35 Hillsborough teachers who will participate in the pilot phase.

Each chapter depends on donations to cover its operating costs, and typically expands each year to include more teachers and students.

Wish, a former first-grade teacher, created the curriculum in 2001.

Little Kids Rock provides musical instruments, such as 30 new guitars per educator for use in class, training materials and continuing tutorials through an Internet television station (truefire.com/lkrtv/).

"These guys have great energy and passion for working with children," Wish said Friday, taking a break from leading an impromptu guitar jam. "I have a lot of confidence that the Tampa chapter is going to make a lot of mischief for a lot of years."

Funding Is Tribute To Slain Guitarist

The \$60,000 startup funding for the Hillsborough chapter came from "Six-String Masterpieces," a 2007 auction and tribute to Darrell "Dimebag" Abbott, the late guitarist of Pantera and Damageplan, who was killed onstage in December 2004.

A second chapter in Abbott's hometown of Arlington, Texas, also was formed from auction proceeds.

The auction, which raised about \$215,000, included 65 guitars customized, hand-painted and inscribed by some of the most recognized names in popular music, tattooing and visual arts.

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Elliott Rubinson, president of Dean Guitars, who worked with Abbott to design a line of custom guitars, sponsored the auction. And Tampa musician Christopher "Curse" Mackey curated the exhibit, taking the guitars on an extended tour of music festivals and events across the country.

Rubinson on Friday gave each teacher a new Dean electric guitar. The teachers also received a new Marshall amplifier.

"Seeing the reaction from the teachers is just fantastic," he said.

Mackey, who has toured with several nationally known bands, said the hard work was worth it to bring such a program here.

"Being able to view it first-hand and see it in our own backyard, this was the payoff," he said.

Melanie Faulkner, supervisor of elementary fine arts for the Hillsborough school district, said the program will reach schools across the county. The program is expected in classrooms by the 2008-09 school year.

"Our teachers have been so excited," she said.

A Chance To Try New Things

The energy was evident during Friday's session inside a large music room at the Rampello Downtown Partnership School.

Wish walked between the rows of chairs and sheet-music stands, offering advice, jokes and instruction. At one point, he asked for someone to play a song. One teacher launched into the opening chords of "Smells Like Teen Spirit," by Nirvana.

"Is that 'Looks Like We Made It?'" Wish asked to laughter. "Barry Manilow?"

Beth Lamb of Gorrie Elementary School in South Tampa was asked to play drums, something she'd never done in front of a crowd.

"It encourages exploration," she said of the program. "This opens up the door for the kids to try new things, experiment, and it's OK."

Kim Roberts of Mitchell Elementary School and Phil McReynolds of Forest Hills Elementary School used a 10-minute break to practice playing.

"He just gave us electric guitars," Roberts said, still excited. "My jaw just dropped."

For McReynolds, the Little Kids Rock program will help bring teachers and students together through music that both age groups can enjoy. And it will accentuate an interest that already is being stoked in students by video games such as "Guitar Hero."

"It's creating a musical bridge," he said, "where we can connect."

Reporter John W. Allman can be reached at (813) 259-7915 or jallman@tampatrib.com. Keyword: Guitars, to view photos and a video report of the custom instruments.

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What a cool program! If they had something like this when I was a kid I might have been much more interested in music classes.

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