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REACHING OUT

PianoBank pays big dividends

A music-business entrepreneur invests in the dreams of students who otherwise might not have instruments on which to practice.

Jean Patteson | Sentinel Staff Writer

Posted January 7, 2007

PHOTOS



Practice, practice, practice
(JULIE FLETCHER, ORLANDO SENTINEL)
Dec 29, 2006



Something to sing about
(JULIE FLETCHER, ORLANDO SENTINEL)
Dec 20, 2006



PianoKids Awards
(COURTESY OF GARY GRIMES)
Dec 26, 2006

One moment, the small, crowded room is filled with excited chatter. The next, there's a sudden lull in the conversation.

That's when Gary Grimes steps up to the piano and pounds out the first bars of "Santa Claus Is Coming to Town." A half-beat later, everyone in the room -- friends, family, strangers -- is singing along.

Such is the power of music.

Were it not for music, four people from different parts of the Orlando community might never have connected. One of the four is Grimes, a music-business entrepreneur and philanthropist.

The others are a longtime music teacher, a self-taught teen musician and a beginning music student with no piano to practice on.

"Music changed my life. It gave me direction," says Grimes, owner of Steinway Piano Galleries in Altamonte Springs and founder of the Steinway Society of Central Florida. He started music lessons at 5, worked his way through high school and college playing and teaching piano, and has been in the music business in the Orlando area since 1989.

Now, through a program that provides used pianos to talented but needy students in Central Florida, Grimes hopes music will bring focus and delight to the lives of dozens of youngsters.

Last year, he explains, the music department at the University of Central Florida traded in its old pianos for new Steinways. "I thought: Why not create a piano bank? Why not refurbish the old pianos and give them away to deserving youngsters?"

There must be thousands more pianos not being used in Central Florida, he says. "So instead of selling them, or keeping them around gathering dust, why not donate them to a good cause?"

He proposed the idea to the Steinway Society, whose mission includes nourishing the musical talents of disadvantaged youth. The society embraced the concept, and its PianoBank was born.

"Owning a piano is an impossible dream for families who are economically challenged," says Grimes. "It became our mission to find kids who are taking lessons but have no piano in the home. Then, through PianoBank, to loan them pianos for as long as they're active in music."

To that end, he enlisted the help of Gloria Green, who has taught piano to hundreds of Orlando kids for more than 30 years. Like Grimes, she believes in the transformative magic of music.

"Piano helps with everything," says Green, who also teaches music at Tangelo Park Elementary School. "It increases focus and concentration. It increases the IQ. It promotes social skills. Shy students gain confidence when they see people enjoying their music."

Last summer, Grimes and Green started identifying students who would qualify for PianoBank instruments. They also solicited recommendations from the directors at Orlando's Callahan Neighborhood Center, where the Steinway Society is funding piano lessons for children in the Parramore Kidz Zone, a program that provides learning opportunities.

In November, in a ceremony presided over by Orlando Mayor Buddy Dyer, the first seven recipients of good-as-new pianos were announced. They include Leamon Stubbs, 17, a self-taught

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PianoBank was created last July by the Steinway Society of Central Florida to lend gently used pianos to talented students who cannot afford instruments.

Students are recommended for the program by their piano teachers; they can keep the pianos as long as they continue to take lessons and practice, and can earn ownership of the instruments through continued progress.

Application forms for the PianoBank program are available from area piano teachers, at Steinway Piano Galleries, 303 E. Altamonte Drive, Altamonte Springs, or steinwayorlando.com/society.

Yes No

Yes No

Yes No

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To donate pianos to PianoBank, call 407-339-3771 or visit the above Web site.

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musician who is helping with the Kidz Zone teaching program, and Toshmari Christmas, 11, a beginning pianist.

It was on Toshmari's PianoBank piano, delivered in late December, that Grimes gave his impromptu rendition of "Santa Claus is Coming to Town."

An eager student

The big red D.C. Moore Moving Co. truck causes quite a stir when it pulls up outside a small white house in Orlando's Richmond Heights neighborhood.

As a gleaming piano topped with a huge red bow is unloaded onto the sidewalk, Toshmari rushes from the house. His mother, great-grandmother and little sister follow. Grimes, his wife, Kathy, and music teacher Green bring up the rear. Curious kids circle on bicycles. Neighbors gawk from front porches. And a fellow in a Santa suit alights from a green SUV, greeting everyone with a hearty "Ho, ho, ho."

The piano is rolled up the driveway, through the front door and installed in the space formerly occupied by the living-room sofa.

Toshmari can't wait for the moving team to return with the piano bench. Standing in front of his shiny instrument, he picks out the notes to his favorite tune, "When the Saints Go Marching In."

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