



Instruments of Hope

AN INSTRUMENT FOR EVERY CHILD DOESN'T JUST TEACH CHILDREN HOW TO PLAY MUSIC, IT TEACHES THEM TO BELIEVE. **BY JAMIE TENNANT**

There's no easy fix for the challenge of at-risk youth in our city. Poverty, unemployment, marginalization and discrimination all feed the problem, and at this point in our history, these societal ills have proven incurable on a wide scale.

Instead, we manage the symptoms as best we can. There are superb programs, run by passionate citizens, making a difference in Hamilton every day. Still, what if we could reach these at-risk youth even sooner? What if we could give them a few tools that might, just might, help them build a better future for themselves, before they are considered at-risk?

For example, what if we taught them to play the clarinet?

An Instrument for Every Child introduces grade school children to music — a laudable goal in and of itself. Many of us learned to play instruments in school, engendering a love of the arts, enrichment in our quality of life, and for some, a life-long hobby or profession. The value of music in our lives is clear. Yet AIFEC's work also results in statistically relevant changes in the lives of its students. The program reaches children at a young, impressionable age, and from this early point, AIFEC helps build self-esteem. The program can change the trajectories of young lives, steering some students clear of the at-risk designation entirely.

This isn't hyperbole or speculation. AIFEC was founded in Germany and based on a successful music education initiative, El Sistema, from Venezuela. Carl Joosse, director of the Voortman Foundation, chose to partner with AIFEC and help them extend their roots into the Hamilton community. He was impressed with the program, and the work of its founder and director Astrid Hepner — but he was also impressed by the quantifiable results.

"In Germany, they were able to register the difference they've made in certain neighbourhoods in terms of college applications, attendance rates, and overall student participation," says Joosse. "The AIFEC system has sort of been proven already in other parts of the world."

To further their work with Hamilton students, Joosse and the Foundation have provided AIFEC with one of the few things it had yet to obtain — a physical core. They have provided them with a new base of operations, in the newly-purchased Gasworks (see sidebar). The partnership is clearly better than an early Christmas present for Hepner, whose enthusiasm about the alliance — and her new offices — is palpable. While she successfully administrated the program from her home for several years, there was some isolation from the work being done on the ground. Having the Gasworks as a resource — offices, performance space, community presence — represents a notable levelling-up for the organization,

giving them a hub for their activities.

"Up until now the relationship was mostly between us and the schools," says Hepner. "We didn't really get to the parents; we would see them at the end of the year. Now that we have this building we have so many opportunities to get the parents more involved. We can do regular concerts on a Saturday morning. Profile our instructors, have them do a concert. Maybe have kids play some instruments, just try them out, like our instrument zoo (an event they put on at Supercrawl) but invite parents, make it an open house. Make this a little bit of a community centre for the parents of the kids involved in the program."

Hepner, a long-time professional musician and member of the Hamilton Music Collective, seems invigorated by the possibilities. The Voortman Foundation is one of several charitable benefactors who have helped Hepner and her team, over several years, as they help children across the city learn to discover their creative potential.

For students, the journey begins in grade one, when AIFEC introduces to basics of music and music education. AIFEC instructors — at current count 12, all passionate local musicians — come to class weekly, working in tandem with music teachers. There's a lot of singing (there's even a few original AIFEC songs like "The AIFEC Blues") and an introduction to various instruments. In the second grade, instrumental instruction begins, leading to more ensemble work as they advance in grades three and four.

In learning the basics of music, AIFEC students learn more than how to play an instrument. They learn teamwork, patience, perseverance, co-operation, and many other skills. These are the significant educational benefits often overlooked or misunderstood by those who feel an arts education might be a "frill."

"It's about perseverance," Hepner says. "It's OK to fail. You get back in it and you keep just chopping away at it. You will always move forward even if you just move in small steps."

Perseverance, patience, focus — these are the sorts of things instrumental instruction can teach. They are also the sorts of skills and attributes many worry are being lost as our children's brains adapt to the inescapable digitization of our society. To learn an instrument is the antithesis of instant gratification. Learning an instrument teaches children that little by little, through practise, they can master something.

Not just something — something kinda cool. AIFEC utilizes guest musicians as well, from varying disciplines and genres. Their presence

is a tangible reminder that yes, people do play music as a career.

"We talk a lot about what it means to be a musician," says Hepner. "How it's not only what you see on stage."

The children even get to see what it feels like on stage, thanks to the year-end AIFEC concert. The concert is clearly close to Hepner's heart, since it is the one time of the year the students get to play for an audience and AIFEC truly makes a connection with parents and other family members.

"[The parents are] a different demographic than might normally come see their kids perform," she says. "And they are so proud! That is such an amazing experience to see — the kids being able to show off to their parents and their peers, to demonstrate to other classes and their teachers what they've learned, but also for the parents to experience what their kids are doing. For some parents it's like wow, that's my child, and you see them all with their phones taking videos."

If Hepner's goal of transforming the Gasworks into an open-door community centre for the AIFEC program can be realized, these types of moments will only increase in frequency. Ultimately, Jooisse believes that the positive outcomes of the AIFEC program will be felt in other ways, possibly even in his other charitable groups. Jooisse also works with the Living Rock, and says the dream would be for the Living Rock to have less work to do — because fewer children grow into at-risk teenagers.

"I think the long term impact is that's going to fundamentally change what those organizations are doing," he says. "Investing in kids in grades one to four, we're going to see a whole different breed of kids coming into high school. When we start looking at what youth at risk encompass, we're hoping that youth at risk will now be able to contribute — rather than needing a hand, they'll be the ones giving a hand."

Perhaps, in a decade, some of the communities impacted by AIFEC will be producing more leaders and fewer people will succumb to risk; perhaps they will contribute volunteer hours rather than requiring volunteerism to help them. Jooisse hopes that the program will open children up to other worlds, outside of their own, a "world where possibilities are endless and they can be anything that they want to be."

"It sounds pie in the sky, but it's true when you're at that age," Jooisse says. "The future is endless for these children. Music can show them how beautiful the world can be, what a big impact they can have in it — being part of it, being able to play it, that's what builds self-confidence and self-esteem. That's the biggest tool they can have to succeed in the future."

What You Need to Know

Who: An Instrument For Every Child

What They Do: AIFEC provide instructors to co-facilitate music education for disadvantaged children in grades one through five. The program promotes an interest in music and the arts, builds self-esteem, and makes them less likely to be at-risk when they become teenagers.

A Brief History: AIFEC was founded in 2009, when they started a pilot project at King George school. From that class of 20 students, they expanded to almost 400 children in seven schools and one community centre.

The New Partnership: Carl Jooisse, Chairman of the Board at the Voortman Foundation, was looking to expand the Foundation's support for Hamilton's inner-city youth. He felt AIFEC were a perfect high-impact choice, thanks to the group's solid foundation, administration, existing community networks, and the program's results.

The New Digs: The Gasworks at 141 Park St. N. was originally a coal gas production plant. Recently owned by the One Community Church, the building was recently sold to the Voortman Foundation, who have opened it to AIFEC as their base of operations. The space has a 100-capacity theatre space for performances as well — Arkells performed here with Boris Brott's National Academy Orchestra earlier this year, and the Hamilton Music Collective has recently programmed jazz events there as well. **HM**



MOUSTACHE MUSIC VOL.9

The Epitome of a Punk Pedigree



The opportunity to combine your childhood passions into a career might seem unrealistic, but photographer and Dublin native Cormac Figgis

was able to do just that. The grandson of Ireland's National Scribe and the son of a reknowned architect, Figgis was surrounded by creativity growing up. He came upon his own passions in 1977 at the age of 10, when he found his first photographic subject — his father's '62 E Type Jaguar — and discovered the Sex Pistols.

Figgis went on to study design in Dublin, where he immersed himself in the thriving punk scene, but it wasn't until a return to Dublin in the mid '00s that he began to combine music and photography by regularly shooting his favourite Irish punk band Paranoid Visions. Eventually he was asked to join the band as their bass player, a fitting turn of events; not only did it allow Figgis to photograph bands he had idolized as a kid — including the Sex Pistols — it gave him insight into the complex relationship between performer and photographer.

"Punk has inspired me to take photos that capture the attitude and aggression on stage," says Figgis. "Bands that just stand on stage and play without any expression of anything don't really interest me much."

He's still applying that philosophy to his work today in Hamilton, capturing raw, often black and white images of local musicians, including Harrison Kennedy and Laura Cole.

"Hamilton reminds me a lot of Dublin in the 1980s," he says. "There's a roughness and grit at its heart which appeals greatly. Hamilton has a lot of soul. It kind of feels like a home away from home." BY KEVIN DELANEY