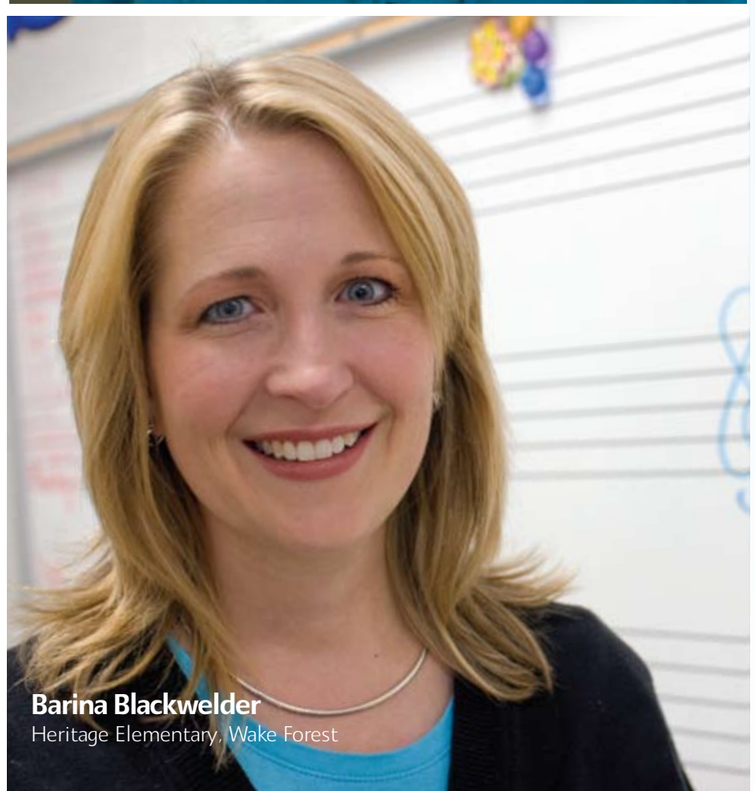
LaSaundra Lindsey
Eastway Elementary, Durham

Angela Mangum
Mt. Energy Elementary, Creedmoor

Lori Evans
Cumberland County Schools



Barina Blackwelder
Heritage Elementary, Wake Forest

Tales from the Trenches

Compiled by Beth Johnson and Jeannie Mellinger | Photography by Michael Zirkle

At this season's North Carolina Symphony Teacher Workshop Day, *Opus* took the opportunity to talk with some of our state's most passionate music educators. It was not only a day to review the upcoming 2007-08 education concert program but also a chance to gather these teachers in one place, facilitating discussions on music education and all of the perks and challenges that entails.

Teachers are particularly talented storytellers, especially when the subject is how music has an impact on their students. We heard fascinating stories that touch on every aspect of education from improving math and science skills to breakthroughs with discipline problems. The common thread is that music education is a key tool in getting through to children and strengthening their overall education experience. Here are some of those stories as told by a few of the teachers we met at the workshop.

Teaching by Example

LaSaundra Lindsey, Eastway Elementary, Durham

I've been teaching in Durham for five years and at Eastway Elementary since January 2007. I have played the cello since the fourth grade and have loved it since my first orchestra class that year.

I wanted to play the violin so badly – I just had my heart set on violin. But I was late for class (to this day I don't remember why I was late) and when I got there, all the violins were taken. The only thing left was one cello. The teacher said to me, "Oh LaSaundra, I have this beautiful cello just for you!" I was disappointed and I replied, "Now how am I supposed to fit that thing up under my chin?" The whole class laughed and the teacher did too – I was so embarrassed, but I have loved and studied the cello ever since.

I attended college at North Carolina Central University and got a degree in cello performance. I studied with Dr. Timothy Holley. For the first time I saw someone who looked like me playing a classical instrument. And really, this was my main reason for going into education. Children know the band instruments and they know the drums, maybe, but not the stringed instruments. So it became my mission in life to share my passion and interest with students.

At Eastway, many of the students are from low socio-economic backgrounds and have never been exposed to classical instruments up close and personal. So after I started at Eastway, I formed a partnership with Dr. Holley and he came to the school so that we could perform duets in an all-school assembly – pre-Kindergarten through fifth grade.

After that first assembly in February, the computer teacher stopped me one day and said, "Let me tell you about the impact you've made through that assembly." And she explained that her pre-K through second graders were learning to draw on their computers and they all wanted to draw a cello, because "Miss Lindsey plays the cello."

I plan to start up a Suzuki string program at Eastway. My students just won't know about opportunities to play stringed instruments if they don't experience it for themselves. As it was for me, it's that idea of seeing "someone who looks like me" play the violin or the cello.

I'm hoping to find a way to buy instruments at a discount and I have some ideas for more partnerships like the one with Dr. Holley. I am also working on a proposal to bring musicians to the school to spend time with my students. That direct contact is so important!

Strings In Creedmoor

Angela Mangum, Mt. Energy Elementary, Creedmoor

Eight years ago, I was asked to fill an unexpected vacancy at my child's elementary school as a music teacher. I inquired about the music supplies. There weren't any. Where was the music classroom? There wasn't one. How much money was in the music budget? A budget for music supplies?

Right away I could see that the arts had not been made a priority in the past at this school or in this rural county. As a Meredith College graduate, I knew that my mission was to inspire a lifelong learning in the arts. After contacting Dr. Fran Page at Meredith, I was directed to several Wake County music teachers who offered supplies, textbooks, CDs, and overall support.

A music classroom was acquired, and with the help of the Parent Teacher Organization, we gained two pianos (buy one, get one free was the deal!) and numerous percussion instruments. The program continued to grow and so did our school's population. I transferred to a new school, along with the principal who had originally recruited me, Mrs. Diane Garrison. A former art teacher, Mrs. Garrison supported my efforts any way that she could. Our students' progress in music was evident in that we were now being represented in the North Carolina State Elementary Honors Chorus.

So many good things were happening, but one very important element was missing: strings education. When I brought my concern to a county administrator, I was told that the county did not need an orchestra because it had a jazz band. I was very troubled by that statement. So, I decided to take all of my fourth and fifth grade students on a field trip so that

they could see and hear a professional orchestra – the North Carolina Symphony.

Never, in most of their lives, had they ever heard or seen anything like this concert. The children wrote letters to the administration stating why they should be allowed to study stringed instruments. A "String Awareness Night" took place with local musicians and a performance by the Durham Junior Youth Orchestra. The fire had been lit, inspiration filled the air, and the children were ready.

And then it happened! A local musician, Mrs. Evelyn Snyder, came forward to say that she was willing to take the lead on forming a strings program. With the support of the principal and several community arts grants, Mt. Energy Strings was formed. The program, now in its fourth year, currently operates as an after-school program and serves students from several area schools.

What will the future bring for Granville County students? As a new administration is organizing, I have great hope for the children. When leaders begin to ask questions about expanding the strings program to every school, I know that all my years of perseverance have paid off. When school leaders along with local governmental leaders are willing to support education in the arts, I know that the future will be brighter, minds will be more creative and voices and instruments will make music together!

Using Music to Change Lives

Lori Evans, Cumberland County Schools

My calling as a music teacher came to me very early. When I was 14, my ninth-grade choral director gave me a ticket to attend our high school's spring chorus concert since she was unable to go. The experience changed my life and career direction.

I listened, mesmerized by the beautiful music from these talented singers and I knew at that moment that I wanted to be a part of that ensemble. To close the concert, Mrs. Pickett, their choral director, sang her traditional "senior song." By the time she was finished, I was overwhelmed with emotion and had made my career choice. I, too, was going to share the beauty of music with children.

Following the concert, I introduced myself and informed her that I would be in her class in the coming fall. She smiled and welcomed me warmly. That August my journey officially began. To this day, I teach children not only basic skills and concepts, but I also help them open the world of aesthetic beauty in their growing minds. Together we teach each other about life. Through music making, we create, share and build self-esteem.

Each child arrives in my classroom with his or her own agenda and with differing requirements. This makes the impact that music had on an autistic child one of my most poignant memories. She was non-verbal except for a few guttural sounds that she used to express extreme happiness or anger. She was also very physically aggressive to anyone who touched or even came too close to her. Our relationship was quite tenuous at first and I respected her need for ample personal space.

A number of months elapsed and slowly her teacher and I noticed subtle changes in her behavior. She became eager to line up to go to music. She would enter my room with a huge smile and would then jump up and down with delight when she liked a song. She began interacting with me and then began expressing herself through dance when I played her favorite song. (I soon began playing it during every class!)

Slowly, I began to reach out and gently touch her as I passed out instruments. After several weeks, she no longer pulled back. Then, she started touching me first. One day she even hugged me as she entered class, all the while staying silent to the rest of the world.

About halfway through our third year together (she was now a fifth grader) and after her teacher's daily efforts at coaxing her to talk – it happened. She said her first word. In my room! To me! Her teacher and I stood utterly overwhelmed with joy! Something in music stirred this child's soul and gave her the motivation to speak. This was truly a humbling experience. She moved on to middle school the next year, but last I heard, she is continuing to build her vocabulary every day.

My role as a music teacher is an unfinished symphony, just as it should be. Each day I am charged with the responsibility of possibly changing a child's life with music. I have had children tell me that my music class is the only reason they come to school. Although the thought of that makes me very sad, at the same time, it empowers me to advocate for music in our schools. Music is such an incredibly powerful tool for our children. I have been given a responsibility that I accept with both honor and determination. As a music teacher, I am changing young lives.

Students as Recording Stars

Barina Blackwelder Heritage Elementary, Wake Forest

I was once given an invaluable piece of advice by my college professor, Bill McCloud at Appalachian State University in Boone. He stressed to his future elementary music specialists to find something that set them apart. Well, I am 20 years into my teaching career and Mr. McCloud is probably smiling down from heaven because it only took ten years to figure it out!

Elementary school music programs are not blessed with big budgets. That's a fact. I wanted my students to experience a music program that offered as many instruments as possible first hand, and they have, thanks to the vision of a great friend. When my long-time college friend Brian Franklin contacted me about recording a "school CD," my head started spinning with everything that would have to be done. I couldn't imagine tackling such a project. With a lot of coaxing, he convinced me that we really could do the project and help the students to be successful, as well as help raise money to buy instruments for my program.

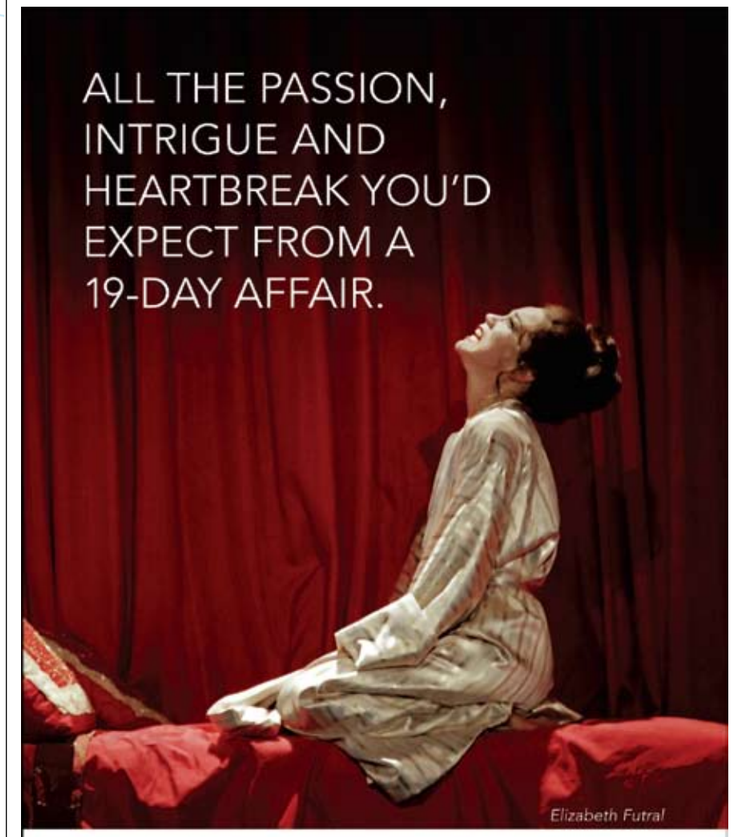
The first couple of CDs included only songs sung by my chorus and electronic pieces composed by my MIDI Clubs, as well as a few students that composed pieces on their own. Since then, we have included every student (all 1,000) in the recording process! Our fifth project was completed in December of 2006. I am most proud of this because it also showed collaboration with the classroom teachers. Teachers chose students to record their original writings, which were then grouped and played together with background music. In all, we had 1,000 singers, over 100 authors/readers, and 50 soloists. This was, by far, our biggest project to date.

We only record a school CD every other year, because of the work it entails. Here are some of the details.

Six months before recording begins, songs are chosen, royalties are secured, students are taught, and recording schedules are made. Our art specialist also guides the fifth graders in submitting artwork to be chosen for the CD. When recording time finally arrives, Brian arrives from Tennessee with all his recording equipment and my music room is transformed into a recording studio.

For two days, we record half the school. Brian then has to come back about a month later to record the other half of the school because we are year-round. I then help Brian with some with the mixing before he heads home – the rest is up to him. This makes me thankful that I don't do this all the time!

We kick off the release of our CDs with a CD concert in which a select number of classes are chosen to perform their pieces. Our last concert was particularly special to me. I called some of the students to the stage who read on the CD. One kindergartener had written a short piece entitled "My Mommy." When her voice came across the sound system with the sentimental music, there wasn't a dry eye in the house. It is a joy to see my students displaying such pride, accomplishment and ownership through these projects, all while uniting my school through music.



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