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Teaching drumming and responsibility

When Tobin Wagstaff was a teen, his love of music kept him out of trouble, or at least on the edge of it.

He had, in short, a lot of "emotional issues" to deal with: He says he grew up in a military family that moved frequently; his parents divorced; and issues related to alcohol factored into his home life.

"I don't know what I would have done without music," says Wagstaff. "I'd be dead or in jail."

Today, the 24-year-old University of Florida music grad is married and the father of three young children, ages 1 to 3, and executive director of Studio Percussion, a non-profit music school for people of all ages, but especially for kids.

Studio Percussion focuses on drums and percussion. Instruction includes orchestral, marching, drum set and ensembles, and ethnic and Latin percussion.

Building on what he learned in his own growing-up years, Wagstaff created a program that he says uses music as a catalyst and pathway to healthy self-esteem.

Wagstaff's mission: That kids learn about themselves through drumming, and grow into leaders and contributors to the community in the process.

"Ours is more a nurturing approach," Wagstaff explains. " We care ultimately more about the children who we're teaching, not so much about whether they're playing something correctly. We give them opportunities to discover themselves by giving them a venue to get out of their little box and try things."

"We get everybody involved," continues Wagstaff. That includes "regular" music students and at-risk youth, the disabled and those living in poverty. "We want to encourage, inspire and motivate people, and we use music as a tool for that."

Wagstaff is developing partnerships with the Boys & Girls Club of Alachua County and Big Brothers/Big Sisters of Gainesville, with the goal of providing disadvantaged young people the chance to get involved in drumming. He recently introduced his program to the Hippodrome's Break-A-Leg spring-break camp and taught classes at Half Pints Learning Center in Newberry.

Public performances and recitals are important. "We want to empower kids. We want them to feel like they are contributing to the community," Wagstaff said.

His students performed at the Spring Arts Festival last weekend and will perform again publicly at the Celebration of the Child event at the Downtown Community Plaza April 17.

Board member Garrett Hall says watching the kids perform is "impressive."

"Their parents and community members were awed by the kids' talent and the confidence they displayed when they were playing," says Hall, who works in Shands' public relations department and has worked with Wagstaff in various bands.

"I see Tobin's heart and his passion for reaching out to the community and making a positive difference in kids' lives," says Hall. "He's giving them the skills they need to function appropriately in society, to help them be the best they can be, to encourage them, to empower them, to open their eyes through their own creativity."

Wagstaff says today's youth face a lot of issues: fragmented families, abuse, neglect, bullying and peer pressure, to name a few.

"Our goal is not that our students become professional drummers. We want our students to feel better about themselves. We want to make them feel confident," says Wagstaff. "A lot of the kids told me that because I believed in them, it helped them believe in themselves."

Casey Glant's son, Alex Klausner, 14, has studied drums with Wagstaff for two years. Alex attends Gainesville High School and drums for his band, Same Difference, which performed two years ago at UF's Gator Growl.

"Alex has really learned a lot about responsibility from Tobin, and he feels good about himself," says Glant. "It helps with his self-esteem and it gives him discipline, and he absolutely loves to drum."

Students can take private or group lessons at Studio Percussion. In group classes, kids develop leadership skills by helping other kids, Wagstaff says.

Wagstaff's goal is inclusivity, to bring people of all ages and ability levels together.

"When adults play with kids, they feel younger, and when kids play with adults, they feel respected," says Wagstaff. His oldest student is in his late 40s. "We discovered that; it wasn't intentional. In our culture, the different age groups tend to be isolated," Wagstaff says.

Studio Percussion has a heavy emphasis on scholarships, which are readily available to those who qualify based on financial need, but they are not of the "free lunch" variety, Wagstaff says.

Kids contribute back to the program by helping with the center's Web site or events, and their progress is assessed quarterly. They must also maintain at least a 75 percent attendance rate.

"We want people to appreciate what we're giving them," he says.

Wagstaff adds that he is interested in collaborating with other community groups: "We're very interested in being creative with the arts. We're not concerned with doing things in a traditional way."

For more information, visit www.studiopercussion.org or call Tobin Wagstaff at 338-8302.

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