

Kids blossom and grow through BlackCat Music Cooperative programs

by Kate Evans

Local kids are exploring their musical talents, gaining self-confidence and expressing themselves creatively through music through BlackCat Music Cooperative's programs. Their mission is providing in-school and after-school music enrichment learning opportunities like music lessons, personal instrument instruction and performance mentoring for young people of all ages in the community.

Family-owned BlackCat Music Shop and Studio co-owner Janet Gauthier began the BlackCat Music Cooperative 501c3 non-profit organization in January to help fill the gap in music education, believing in the power of music to engage young people, enhance their personal growth and development, help sustain their academic success and keep them in school.

Gauthier is the organization's executive director and her son Adam Kary, BlackCat Music Shop and Studio co-owner, is on its board of directors. BlackCat Music Cooperative's logo is empowering youth through music. The organization is collaborating with local schools, community groups, non-profit agencies and interested individuals.

Pilot grant

Gauthier said the BlackCat Music Cooperative received a \$3,000 starter grant from the Tom Seely Foundation. The BlackCat Music Cooperative partnered with Morgan County Schools last April to offer their first program of ukulele lessons at the Warm Springs Middle School MC After 3 program with instructor Mike Kligerman.

A once-a-week ukulele program will begin again this fall at the middle school on October 12. They have several sponsors and grant funding that are helping to



provide instruments and lessons, Gauthier said.

School of Rock success

Gauthier said their BlackCat Music Cooperative is based on the success of the BlackCat School of Rock, which Kary founded in 2007. Around 30 local kids have gone through the program and graduated from it since its start.

Gauthier said at first School of Rock kids would be very shy, wouldn't make eye contact and would stay to the back. She really saw amazing transformations in the teens in each group as they received individual instrument instruction, learned to play songs together and became more self-confident.

Each group of kids went on to college and trade schools, are all good citizens and all ended up being good kids, she said. They visit and perform at BlackCat and keep in touch with their band mates. Several help out and mentor current School of Rock participants to give back to the community.

Intermediate school

The BlackCat Music Cooperative and the Morgan County Partnership sponsored purchasing 25 colorful ukuleles for Warm Springs Intermediate School teachers to learn to play the Positive Action song that Positive Action coordinator Angie Hott wrote to help kids learn to sing it.

The Tri-State Ukuletics learned the tune and made a video to help teachers learn, Gauthier said. Teachers will learn basic ukulele chords, tuning and several other songs. There's also the potential for kids to have access to

the ukuleles to learn to play them too. Students that have seen the ukuleles at the shop are really excited about them coming to the school, she noted.

Gauthier said their cooperative's programs help kids enjoy learning to play music in a safe, nurturing environment. Many families are facing financial challenges from hard economic times and can't afford music lessons for their children.

Scholarships are available through BlackCat Music Cooperative for kids that can't afford music lessons, Gauthier, said BlackCat Music Shop and Studio continues its regular music instruction programs and the BlackCat School of Rock.

VISTA volunteer

AmeriCorps VISTA volunteer Amber Light from the West Virginia Promise-Alliance For Youth is working with Gauthier doing BlackCat Music Cooperative program development, grant writing, funding research and managing their website, Facebook page and other social media. Light, an Alderson-Broaddus University graduate with a psychology major, came on board around two months ago.

Light is currently working on the Friday, October 6 Second Annual Kids Music Day at the Boys and Girls Club of the Eastern Panhandle's Morgan County unit. Gauthier said that the Tri-State Ukuletics will be performing and three of its youth performers will play for the kids. The BlackCat Music Cooperative is going to be making shaker percussion instruments with



BlackCat Music Cooperative executive director Janet Gauthier (left) and AmeriCorps Promise VISTA Amber Light are seen with some of the 25 colorful ukuleles that Warm Springs Intermediate School will receive on October 9 through a collaboration between their organization and the Morgan County Partnership.

club members and teaching them about ukuleles, music and how great music is, Light said.

Light is also a trombone player and is learning to play the cello. She played in her high school and college bands and brings her musical expertise and enthusiasm for music to their efforts, Gauthier said.

Light said that what she loves about music "is that it's a way to express yourself." She hopes to make the BlackCat Music Cooperative programs sustainable after her year of VISTA service is up.

Gauthier said they're pursuing grants, seeking private donors, scholarship donations and local funding opportunities and are collaborating with non-profit organizations and schools to sustain their programs. Gauthier and Light attended a recent West Vir-

ginia Families Leading Change conference to learn about additional resources and grant funding.

Future programs

A weekly guitar club at the Boys and Girls Club for middle school and high school students will be starting by the beginning of November. Gauthier applied for a grant for the guitars. Six selected teens will get to keep the guitars if they complete the program.

Other possible BlackCat Music Cooperative programs are additional in-school and after-school music instruction programs with other instruments, a Berkeley Springs High School guitar club and a singing class for younger students, depending on interest.

Also in the works is a BlackCat Music Cooperative summer rock camp where teens will improve their instrument skills and create a community music event. The BlackCat Music Cooperative

is collaborating with the Morgan County Partnership on a future "Morgan County Has Talent" music event, Gauthier said.

Benefits of music

Research shows many benefits of music instruction which include language and math development, creative thinking, better memorization and recall skills, problem-solving, teamwork, improved English and math scores and academic achievement and increased self-confidence and self-esteem.

Music also enhances emotional well-being and intellectual development, builds imagination, is relaxing and stress-relieving and teaches discipline and empathy toward others.

For more information about the BlackCat Music Cooperative, call 703-232-2825 or contact them through their website, Facebook page or at blackcatmusiccooperative@gmail.com.