

Youth alliance, piano business team up to build musical memories at a young age

By Joanne McCoy

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Smell is widely regarded as the most evocative of the senses, but Dan Shykind begs to differ. Shykind, who co-owns Downtown Piano Works with his wife, Theresa, weighs in enthusiastically on the side of sound.

"Music has the ability to take us back to a moment in time with pinpoint accuracy," Shykind said recently from his office inside the family's new store on the corner of All Saints and South Market. "Certain notes and songs bring back memories with astounding power and clarity."

"When I think about my earliest musical memory," said Theresa Shykind, "I think about sitting out of sight at the top of the stairs, listening to my sister's music lessons. I was only 3 or 4, but I remember a feeling of magic and enchantment. Shortly after that, my parents realized that I could play by ear, and it was the beginning of my lifelong love of music, especially the piano."



Downtown Piano Works instructor Joellyn Jarvis works on a keyboard with children from Frederick Alliance for Youth's club explore. From left are Sha'cora Goines, Valentine Rojas, Eric Gyamfi, Jada Dorsey and Alexis Cook.

Thanks to the Shykind and a musical program by Yamaha called Keyboard Encounters Kids, students from the Frederick Alliance for Youth's Club Explore program are starting to build their musical memories at a young age. "I was delighted when Dan and Theresa called to offer Keyboard Encounters to a group of our kids," said Frederick Alliance for Youth Executive Director Scott Alexander. "Our goal is to provide state-of-the-art programming based on children's developmental needs, and something like this is right on target. And the fact that Downtown Piano Works was willing to extend this opportunity to our kids at their cost made it all possible."



Eric Gyamfi and Jada Kirby practice their skills during the weekly lesson.

We're really proud to say we own a business in downtown Frederick," Theresa said. "And we think that with that pride comes a responsibility to give back to the community. Any business can think about what they have to offer, and then find a way to partner with a worthwhile community organization to help amplify that group's programs and services. It's extremely satisfying to think you may be affecting a person's life, just by offering them your passion ... everybody wins."

The Frederick Alliance for Youth is a nonprofit organization founded in 2008 to promote and support positive change in the Hillcrest and Waverley communities. Eventually, the organization plans to build a youth center that will house accessible, affordable, fun youth programs that promote healthy development from childhood to adulthood. Plans for the center include a gym, stage, ten classrooms, a music room, a multi-sports/fitness room and a computer lab.

Accompanied by a program aide, the six young musicians arrive by bus shortly before 5 p.m. each Tuesday for a 45-minute of group lesson featuring solo and ensemble playing, music reading and singing. The students have the use of their own Clavinova, a digital piano with special features that make learning the basic songs of Level I interesting and fun for the class.



Downtown Piano Works instructor Joellyn Jarvis plays note recognition games with the students.

"Fifty percent of would-be pianists stop their lessons within the first year," Dan said. "That's why it's important to offer a program that holds the students' interest into the second year and beyond. When students make it into the second year, the attrition rate goes down to 10 percent. Keyboard

Encounters does a lot to encourage young players to hang in there."

"A Clavinova is a wonderful first piano for young students," Theresa said, "because, while it maintains the traditional acoustic piano touch and tone, it has all kinds of cool accompaniments and instrument voices that make playing together a lot of fun for beginners."



Downtown Piano Works has begun a program to help a group through Frederick Alliance for Youth. Here, a child practices playing piano.

On a recent afternoon, instructor Joellyn Jarvis welcomed the six Club Explore students, all between the ages of 7 and 10. As they settled in at their instruments, they turned their practice books to songs like Monkey Business, Two by Two and Our Jazz Band. As they played each song, individually and as a group, their teacher walked among them, tweaking a hand position here, adjusting a student's posture there. In between songs, students practiced reading notes from the blackboard and clapped out rhythms and rests. Outside, a Frederick rush hour, complete with fire trucks from the station across the street, was in full force, but the students' attention barely wandered.

Alexis, Sha'Cora and Jada agree that there's something special about Tuesdays. "We can't wait to get here after school," Alexis said, speaking for the group. "It's fun, and we think we sound pretty good already." "I've wanted to do this ever since I was a little girl," 8-year-old Janaya said. "I'm so lucky that I get to do this. I'm going to practice my whole life so I get a music scholarship." Valentina, a third grader from Hillcrest Elementary, said she hopes the piano will be the first of many instruments she learns in her life. "I practice all the time, except when I'm in school or in church." Nine-year-old Eric, who said he doesn't mind being the only boy in the class right now, wants to play in a band someday.

"We don't want people to be intimidated by these instruments," Dan said. "It's true: they are beautiful. But they are meant to be played. They exist to be enjoyed, and we love it that the store is almost always filled with the sound of students of all levels, practicing and having fun."