

Schoolhouse Rock - Motivated by music

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- Author/Byline: Kristen A. Graham INQUIRER STAFF WRITER
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Everything about this South Philly rock band is unlikely.

Consider: its budget is zero, and all of its gear is donated. None of its musicians had picked up an instrument until recently, and some have yet to hit puberty.

But Home, the remarkable Andrew Jackson Elementary School rock band, has jammed with - and drawn plaudits from - major stars. It has played before audiences of thousands.

And when the nine-member ensemble finishes a crisp, enthusiastic version of "Little Talks," the Of Monsters and Men song, the audience is on its feet, cheering.

They're not clapping because they're kids. They're clapping because they're good.

That Home exists at all is a fluke. Many Philadelphia School District schools lack music programs, but Jackson, at 12th and Federal, has built a strong arts curriculum, with partnerships allowing it to offer dance, theater, and fine arts.

Teacher Chrisostomos Argerakis is responsible for much of that.

Argerakis, 43, is a city native and musician who spent eight years in Los Angeles trying to break into film composition. He moved back to Philadelphia in 2006, earned a graduate degree in music education, and got his first teaching job - at Jackson - in 2008.

When he walked into his classroom, there was no music program to speak of, only an old piano and a few broken bells. He knew the district could provide no financial help, so, over many months, he raised money for recorders, then for guitars for his general music classes. (In all, he has collected nearly \$30,000 via Donors Choose, an online fund-raising site.)

Most schools have more traditional orchestras or bands, but Argerakis' vision was different.

"If I tried to teach music reading, given the climate of our school, I'd tune out 95 percent of the kids," Argerakis said. "I wanted to put instruments in their hands and give them immediate success."

By 2010, "Guitar Ensemble" was born, a before-school program that attracted a big following. Argerakis added vocal music, and students were eager to learn more instruments, so he brought in his keyboard, got a drum set, and borrowed a bass.

"It was successful," Argerakis said, "in that I saw that the kids loved it, and it could be something."

The group began playing real gigs in 2011. At first, it was just the Andrew Jackson Rock Band, but then it became Home, after the Edward Sharpe and the Magnetic Zeros song, and because of what the band represents to its members.

A few years in, Home has serious momentum. It has played for the mayor and a national teachers' conference, at the Trocadero and World Cafe Live. Home's members have been mentored by Josh Groban and by Rob Hyman and David Uosikkinen of the Hooters.

The group has been adopted by Musicopia, a Philadelphia nonprofit, and works with Little Kids Rock, a national group. Home also has a farm team now, a junior band to groom Jackson's younger students.

Uosikkinen stopped by the band's basement room this month to jam with Home, using the drum kit between Leila Elmanfaa, 13, and Mario Santiago, 14. After taking their lead on the Hooters "All You Zombies," Uosikkinen was wide-eyed.

"These guys were killing it," Uosikkinen said, nodding at Leila and Mario. "You guys are real pros. Every time I see this band, it's lockdown city."

Jackson is a diverse school with 450 students, 20 percent of whom are learning English and 94 percent of whom are considered poor.

Argerakis identifies with his pupils. A shy, introverted Philadelphia public school student, he loved to draw and found himself when he began playing music.

"Some of them don't have the most stable home lives," he said of his students. "They don't have an outlet until they find this very nurturing, loving environment, and it means the world to them."

The opportunities available to Home are not lost on its members, who work hard, arriving at school early and staying late several times a week, giving up weekends to play gigs.

"I tell them, 'You have a job to do.' I tell them, 'If I don't show up, I don't keep my job. You have to live up to expectations and keep your job,'" Argerakis said.

At rehearsals and performances, the group works like a family, alternately serious and light. Argerakis nurtures his students, but lets them know when they're sloppy, and he insists that they replay songs if the sound is off.

Leila, a Home co-captain and gifted artist, said the band is her anchor.

"It's called Home for a reason," she said. "It's the good thing about school, the only reason I'm still here."

Jasmine "Jazz" Yedra plays piano and serves as the other co-captain. Steady and mature beyond her years, she helped come up with the band's name and suggests many of its songs. Home, she said, has helped to transform Jackson, a public school whose reputation is growing in the city.

Like other Home members, Jasmine was always interested in music but never had a chance to play.

"Until Mr. A. came in," she said. "Everything changed then. Now, we can be superstars. We can feel famous."

The school district's dire budget situation has impacted Home, of course. Argerakis knows Principal Lisa Kaplan has no money in her budget for new instruments or guitar picks or fixing broken equipment. Fund-raising and partnerships have to take care of that. T-shirt sales and any money the band makes playing gigs help, too.

Home plays in the basement of the 100-year-old school, in an imperfect room whose concrete slab floor makes practice tough after a long day.

"I'm trying to get a carpet to help with sound," Argerakis said. "I would love to have a ceiling fan in here. There's always things that we need."

Argerakis is paid nothing for the time he spends with Home, hundreds of hours donated because not giving the kids Home is unthinkable to him. Jackson, like other district schools, was stripped of its budget to pay teachers to run extracurricular programs.

Every year, he worries he's going to get laid off, and he has to teach private music lessons four days a week to make ends meet, Argerakis said. But it feels like an OK trade-off.

"The relationship I have with the kids, and what it does for the climate of the school - that makes it worth it," Argerakis said.

Kaplan, the school's dynamic principal, knows music and art keep students motivated, and she cherishes what Home does for Jackson.

"Some of them are great students, but some of them are quiet, withdrawn kids, and they have gotten into this thing that makes them blossom," Jackson said. Some graduates come back to sit in with the band or play at gigs.

"Home is my life," guitarist Ana Canchola, 14, said simply.

The band has become Jackson's calling card, she said.

"Every school has wonderful things, but Home is like our beacon of light," she said.

Jasmine agreed.

"What school," she asked, smiling, "has a band you can jam with?"

kgraham@phillynews.com

215-854-5146 @newskag www.inquirer.com/

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- Caption: PHOTO Julia Yedra (left) on bass, and teacher Chrisostomos Argerakis on electric guitar, rehearse with the band Home as friends and family watch and take photos. Argerakis started Donors Choose to help fund the music program. Hooters drummer David Uosikkinen (center), plays with Andrew Jackson Elementary's rock band, Home. "These guys were killing it," he said of fellow drummers Leila Elmanfaa (left), 13, and Mario Santiago, 14. MICHAEL S. WIRTZ / Staff Photographer Maria Moreno, guitar, and Julia Yedra, bass, practice with their band, Home. Andrew Jackson Elementary School has a strong arts curriculum. MICHAEL S. WIRTZ / Staff

Photographer

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