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Class Act: Program donates instruments to needy schools - Richmond Heights Middle's band program got a boost from an unexpected source: A program spearheaded by a Miami Beach youngster that donates used musical instruments to needy schools.

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When Benjamin Dietch, a sixth-grader at Nautilus Middle School in Miami Beach, proposed a musical instrument drive to his music instructor, he didn't know his idea would help restore a school band that had been on hiatus for five years.

Benjamin, along with his mother, Dana Kulvin, and the director of Live! Modern School of Music, Juan Diaz, launched a program called Music for Memories in February. The purpose of the program is to collect used instruments, restore them to playing quality and then donate them to schools in need.

Diaz said his school was the perfect collaborator for Benjamin's idea because, "Live! Modern School of music was founded in 2007 by a group of musicians and artists with the purpose of creating a sustainable community of musicians in Miami."

"Here, students are encouraged to find ways to use music and their talents to give back to the community," Diaz said.

Although the program is still in its infant stages, the Music for Memories has donated a clarinet, drum set and two electric guitars to the band program at Richmond Heights Middle School in Southwest Miami-Dade.

The brains of this charity operation started with a middle-school student who wanted everyone to enjoy music just as much as he did.

"I just really like music so I felt like I needed to inspire others with music. I'm very lucky to be able to do this," said Benjamin, 11, who is mainly a guitarist but recently picked up the saxophone.

Kulvin used email and Facebook to help with the first round of donations.

"We figured out what we needed to do, and did whatever we could to get the word out," Kulvin said.

Diaz went right along with the idea and even offered to restore instruments that weren't up to par.

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"I thought it was a great idea. We always encourage our students to give back to the community and Ben did just that," Diaz said. "When I receive the instruments I replace strings, keys, do tune-ups, or whatever needs to be done to get them in working order."

After the instruments were restored and ready to go, it was time to figure out who needed them. Kulvin contacted Robert T. Davis, district supervisor, performing arts, to see what schools needed the most help. Richmond Heights was at the top of the list.

Leslie Cooper, band director at Richmond Heights, said Benjamin, whom she has never met, answered her prayers.

"I called Robert about the need for instruments after budget cuts, and he told me about this program," Cooper said. "I got the instruments immediately and all of the students are having a blast."

Cooper explained that since the band program at her school has been shut down for five years, many students didn't own instruments. The students who could afford to rent them did, but there was still a shortage. With the help of Music for Memories, Cooper is also hoping to start an after-school jazz band.

"I want to tap into the talents of students who can't participate during class," said Cooper.

She also said that the need for music education in school is often underestimated.

"Students that take a music lesson for two to three years score higher on standardized tests. That's been proven," Cooper said. "They also learn important multitasking skills that are helpful to their future."

Music for Memories was on a brief halt during the summer, but Diaz said with the start of the new school year, he is wants to see more schools receive instruments.

"From now until the end of the school year, Music for Memories will be accepting all types of instruments of all sizes, models and age, whether they are in need of repair or not," Diaz said.

Davis believes this program is a blessing.

"All of our schools need instruments. Music is important to the culture of our schools," Davis said. "We stress community service and Ben is a prime example of giving back to the community."

To donate instrument to Music for Memories, contact Juan Diaz on Facebook at Music for Memories or email him at juandiaz@liveschoolofmusic.com.

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