

## Octave Changes Make Students Mindful

by ALIYYA SWABY | Feb 9, 2016 1:43 pm

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ALIYYA SWABY PHOTO

Porto searches the “feelings sheet” for an adjective.

Antonio Porto is learning how to play Beethoven’s “Ode to Joy” with two hands instead of just one, a process teaching him how to calm himself down when he feels overwhelmed.

Porto started music therapy at New Horizons School because he wanted to learn how to play the piano. How he is applying the music skills to his academic and social life, as part of a push to promote “mindful” behavior at the alternative school on Hallock Avenue.

Funded by Michael Bolton Charities, the music therapy program enables New Horizons students to process trauma and practice coping skills with the help of several noisy tools: kalimba, ocean drum, rain stick, triple cajon conga, sometimes GarageBand synthesizer.

Music therapist Cyd Slotoroff met the school's Principal Maureen Bransfield at a training with the Anti-Defamation League. When Bransfield explained the type of student who attends New Horizons — someone who has undergone trauma, may have behavioral issues and needs extra attention — Slotoroff's interest was immediately piqued. "I love kids like that," she said.

She met with Bransfield and the school's guidance counselor and "decided to go for it," working to "cobble together funding" for the first year. They received money from philanthropic parents who had benefited from Slotoroff's work in the past. This year, Michael Bolton Charities funds her salary, the laptop and the instruments.

Slotoroff started off in the school once a week last year, then got funding this year for three days a week. "It's a huge difference," she said of the tripling of her time in the school. She meets with about 25 students one-on-one, whenever they want to see her.



Porto plays Beethoven's Ode To Joy.

Porto walked into the small music room, sat at the keyboard and instantly placed fingers to start "Ode To Joy," like he had done dozens of times before. He played the first few bars of the song smoothly before a finger slipped. He pinpointed the problems: a thumb that wouldn't move fast enough, a pinky that had trouble stretching. And he kept playing.

Music therapy differs from a typical music class in that it's a "vehicle" to get students to pinpoint and manage their own emotional patterns.

"They might notice what things get in the way of making progress," Slotoroff said. "They're working on noticing themselves. If they're frustrated, we're working on, 'How can he calm down?'"

She gives students leeway to direct the one-on-one classes, often starting with a “jam improv” session where they each pick an instrument, which she has already set to a specific scale. “Anything they play will sound great. They can’t make a mistake,” she said.

Slotoroff watches students as they “explore” the sounds of the instrument and begin to push their creativity as they get more comfortable. She wants students to “do something they thought they couldn’t do and reflect on it. I want to help them empower them.”

Playing gives students a “chance to be right in the moment,” she said, a key tenet of mindfulness. “I’ll ask, ‘Are you thinking about anything else?’ And they’ll say no.”



Slotoroff playing the cajon, made by students in woodshop.

Sometimes the jam session takes off, with Slotoroff and the student responding to the rhythm of the other’s instrument, and learning social skills in the process. “It takes courage to be vulnerable in front of someone,” she said.

Slotoroff asks students to tell her how they feel as they read through the lyrics of a favorite song or after they get through a difficult piece of music. She hands them a double-sided piece of paper full of positive and negative adjectives, to let them more exactly pinpoint the words that correspond to their emotions.

“Anybody that has been traumatized has been disempowered,” Slotoroff said.

Porto, who is 15, has been at New Horizons for a year and a half and struggles with anger issues. Music therapy has taught him “patience,” he said.

In his math class, he gets confused by some of the lessons. Before, he would keep struggling through it. Now, he feels more comfortable taking his time and asking for help—just as he does when he needs help with Beethoven.


How do you feel when you play and when you finish? Slotoroff asked him.

“Good,” he said.

Slotoroff handed him the sheet of feeling words. He perused them for a minute, then rattled off a few: amazed, energetic, enthusiastic.

Then, he turned back to the keyboard, placed both hands, started “Ode to Joy” another time. This time, he went more slowly and deliberately, stretched his pinky to the right key, and didn’t miss a note.

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**posted by: toninye on February 10, 2016 9:28am**

That's my son and I'm very proud of him and I didn't know he was interested in the piano!!! So son I encourage you to play the keys and enjoy it!!! I always wanted to play but my mom wouldn't let me and I always wanted a Baby Grand Piano!!!