

More Than a Music Lesson

Creative local programs inspire those with learning differences and special needs.

BY JEAN SCHEFF

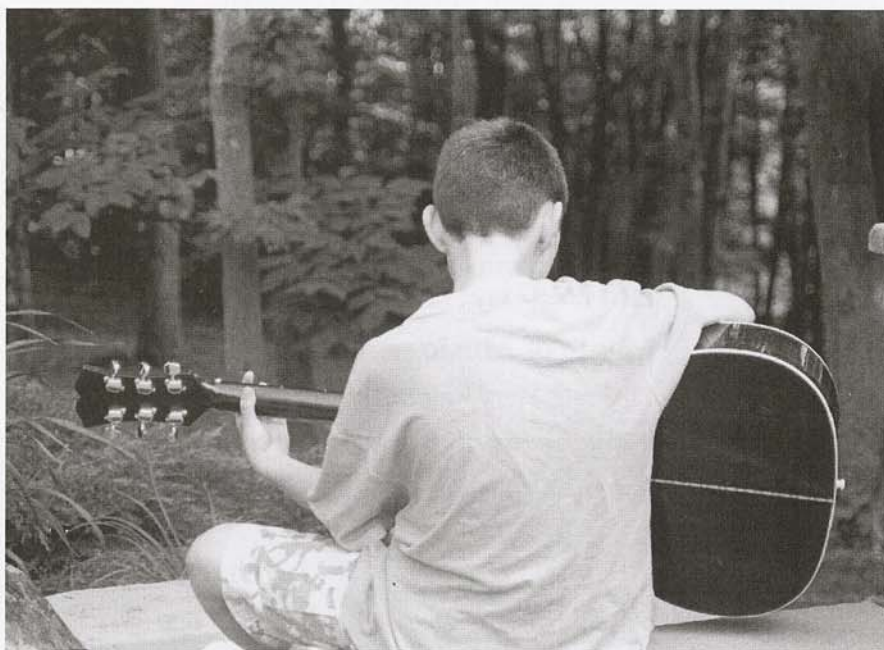
Justin Jacobs, an accomplished Australian pianist, knows something about passion. Consumed by his love of music, Justin was the only student in either his elementary school or high school to play the piano. "The honor made me a bit of a freak," he laughs. But since then, Jacobs says he has found "a whole host of people who are passionate about music and the piano." And it hardly surprises him that some of these musicians are quite young and extra special.

Last year, Jacobs, who studies professionally in New York City, began giving piano lessons at Music in Chappaqua to an 11-year-old Chappaqua boy who has Asperger's syndrome—an autistic spectrum disorder—a move that would prove positive for both student and teacher....

Meeting the Student

Because he's been a musician for some 23 years, practice and preparation are just like breathing to Jacobs. It was no small wonder that he took a studious approach when preparing to work with his new student. He read all he could find on Asperger's, which was quite clinical and dry. Asperger's can impair social interactions as well as cause the development of obsessive routines and a preoccupation with a particular interest or activity.

When the day came for their first lesson, Jacobs says he wound up put-



ting that all aside. "Meeting him as a person was quite different," explains Jacobs. "We have found a way to share music, and like a language, it has become a way in which we can meet each other and connect."

Responding to his student's passionate nature, Jacobs threw out the standard scales and fingering exercises, and tapped into his student's interests. "I found I had quite a film buff on my hands, so we've been having great fun with musical pieces like the Pink Panther and 007 themes."

The boy, a talented musician and quick study, according to Jacobs, is getting more out of his music lessons than performance-related skills. The music gives his student a way to express himself and his passions in a socially acceptable way. "If I had organized our lessons in the traditional way," notes Jacobs, "we would have been struggling with each other, but instead, he is enjoying himself, bringing creativity and

imagination to his work.

Meanwhile, the father of the young boy observes that his son pauses now as he passes the piano, and without any coaching or reminders to practice, begins to tinkle the keys—a sure sign of true enjoyment.

Imparting Life Lessons

Jacobs' experience is a good example of what Tina Breschia, director of on-site services for

the White Plains-based Music Therapy Institute at The Westchester Conservatory of Music, refers to as "adaptive instruction." According to Breschia, there are many different ways a teacher or therapist can use music to impart either musical skills or life lessons to children with learning differences or special needs.

Adaptive instruction requires the teacher to understand the needs of the individual student and to discover an approach that speaks to the student's learning style. "Through musical involvement," says Breschia, "we look to help improve children's cognitive abilities, social skills, emotional functioning, fine and gross motor skills, as well as language and communication skills"

The community has become more aware of these programs—and children are benefiting. Recently, Chappaqua resident Tim Devlin, a