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What's Important to Laguna Beach

What is the the most important question facing Laguna Beach today?



Emmy winning composer Lynda Roth, left, leads Sage Hill singers.

Tapping the Power of Music to Spark Inquisitive Young Minds

By ANDREA ADELSON

"We will become the owners of your land and make you live in the dry desert."

"We go from land to land. Wondering where to stay. You tell us it is ours, but then you take it away."

"I am the document to take away your land; because of the color of your flesh you will be banned."

These examples of poetry penned in February by ninth-grade social studies students of Lara Botel-Sheppard reveal empathy and understanding for a distant historical footnote, the Indian Removal Act of 1830.

Instead of a traditional textbook, the teacher's lesson plan relied on "You Will Go," a song derived from the historically significant law and written by Laguna Beach composer-musician Lynda Roth.

"To get a student to buy into something from the 1830s, she gives them a connection, a window into that world," said Botel-Sheppard, of Penn Manor High School, in Millersville, Penn. "Taking the emotion and feeling and main ideas and making it more accessible; it made a huge difference," she said.

The following day, one of her students showed up in class with a guitar and shared his own mournful-sounding composition inspired by Roth's lyrics. "This kid would never connect to an academic subject," said Botel-Sheppard, the first teacher to put into action Roth's "America Revealed," an alternative teaching approach that integrates music into history and literature studies.

In June, a dozen singers from Newport Beach's Sage Hill School performed Roth's version of the U.S. Declaration of

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Independence set to modern classical music at Romeo Cucina restaurant. Music to "You Will Go" ended up in gospel style. And Roth's version of the U.S. Constitution is a Broadway show tune.

"As a composer, I feel like I'm finally doing my most mature work. I've found my voice," said Roth, an Emmy-winning composer, who like many musicians earns a living juggling between gigs, private teaching and arranging and producing recordings for other musicians.

Even so, while creativity propelled Roth's musical career, the two-year-old Muse Project fulfills the intellectual stimulus it lacked. "I get to become a student of American history. I'm so lucky," she said.

Two years ago, upset about the direction of U.S. foreign policy and taking a walk in Heisler Park, Roth heard an answer to her intellectual struggle. She heard a choir singing familiar phrases plucked from the nation's founding historical documents, such as "We hold these truths to be self evident." An answering choir recited the historical reality of the minority, such as Chief Seattle's plea, "How do you sell the sky?"

A friend suggested she had the makings of an AP history class. More guidance came by a chance meeting with a Boom Boom Room patron, Claremont McKenna Professor Emeritus Robert Fossum, author of a seminal book on historical documents and literature.

While perfect pitch aids musicians, Roth's budding career transformation owes much to near perfect timing.

A backlash is building among educators over the 2001 federal No Child Left Behind law, which punishes school districts financially for low test scores. In many public school districts, one of the consequences is stripping arts and music from the curriculum. "A tremendous amount of critical thinking and creativity is lost," said Penny Bryan, an associate professor of Chapman University's graduate school of education. "History becomes memorization of what's going to be on the test. If it's not on the test, it doesn't get in the curriculum."

In November, Roth will share her curriculum concepts with Bryan's graduate students, teachers, reading specialists or would-be administrators enrolled in professional development classes. "Her program is interdisciplinary. Words may not stick, but words in a song do stick. We know this from brain research," Bryan said. "I want them to see ideas, to show that this is a possibility in curriculum."

While Bryan will turn the spotlight on Roth's work as a model example for students to follow, a University of Pennsylvania institute is also preparing its transformation into workbooks and lesson plans for elementary and middle school teachers who take seminars on the best practices to teach reading and writing.

"I've never seen anything like it," said Bonnie Botel-Sheppard, director of the Penn Literacy Network, part of the university's graduate school of education. Her daughter piloted Roth's idea in the classroom earlier this year.

She crossed paths with Roth when they were girls at a youth camp. "I think Lynda's onto something," Botel Sheppard said. She and four other members of the PLN staff are arriving in Laguna Beach shortly to collaborate with her.

It's too early to predict if Roth's method will catch on with school districts. Naturally, she's hoping the Muse Project goes platinum.

Further information: www.lyndaroth.com

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