

Dulcimers at Dixie Elementary School By Johnny Ray

Well over ten years ago I started playing the mountain dulcimer and using it in my elementary music classes at Dixie Elementary School in Tyler, Texas. I found the mountain dulcimer to be the perfect instrument for accompanying children's voices. It was soft and didn't drown out their singing like the piano I was accustomed to using and it allowed me to sit among my students rather than having the barrier of the piano between us.

My students were so captivated by the sound of the dulcimer that I soon decided they needed to learn to play this instrument and I wrote a grant proposal to fund the purchase of sixteen cardboard dulcimer kits. With the funding of this grant we began the mountain dulcimer program at Dixie in the fall of 1996. After teaching a dulcimer unit to all of my fourth and fifth grade students, we held auditions for those who wanted to be in a dulcimer ensemble and we soon had a fourth grade ensemble and a fifth grade ensemble.

With growing momentum our program increased the following year to include a fifth grade "advanced" ensemble of students who had already spent one year in the fourth grade beginning ensemble. Now we had two beginning groups and the advanced group. It wasn't long before we began receiving invitations to perform for various events around our city.

As we accepted as many performance invitations as we could handle, we soon caught the attention of our local newspaper and television news stations. Before long our dulcimer program had become the best public relations tool that our school had ever had. With this came the benefit of added support from my school administration and from the educational foundation that had funded my original grant proposal.

In the spring of 1999 we held the first Dixie Elementary Mountain Dulcimer Festival, which has become an annual event averaging over 100 elementary-aged dulcimer players and their teachers. We have been blessed to have several nationally known dulcimer teachers volunteer their time to teach at our daylong festival. Our festival includes three or four morning workshops with pizza for lunch and an afternoon filled with jam sessions and concerts.

This past April we held the Ninth Annual Dixie Dulcimer Festival with two former National Mountain Dulcimer Champions, Sue Carpenter and Lloyd Wright, teaching at our festival. Bob Tramel, a local dulcimer player, also taught at this festival and we enjoyed the help of a number of folks from a local dulcimer club, the Jacksonville Jammers.

Since we began our dulcimer program two other local schools and several schools across the country have begun dulcimer programs of their own. As a means of spreading the news about kids playing dulcimer, I have taught mountain dulcimer workshops at two state conventions of the Texas Music Educator's Association held each year in San Antonio. Both times these workshops were filled to capacity with interested public school music teachers.

After using our cardboard dulcimers for a few years, I wrote another grant proposal to buy some McSpadden kits. The proposal was funded by the same local foundation and industrial arts students at a local middle school assembled our new wooden dulcimers. Although the life expectancy of cardboard dulcimers is said to be about five years, we are still using our original cardboard dulcimers after eleven years. Don't underestimate the value of cardboard dulcimers for kids.

My advanced dulcimer group performs many times each year. Nursing homes are some of our favorite places to perform. We try to involve the audience as much as possible. At the end of a nursing home performance, the dulcimer players will place their instruments in the lap or on the wheel chair of a nursing home resident. Then my students give mini-lessons to the people who have just heard us play. It has been great to see the smiles on the faces of these elderly folks as my elementary students share the joy of playing an instrument with them.