

A GROUNDBREAKING Music School for Children with Autism

Opened by Graduate School of Education Alumnus



Ms. LaMon teaches piano student Jason Metzger a new song

S EVEN-YEAR-OLD JASON METZGER, who suffers from autism, loved music from the time he was a baby. He even taught himself to play “Jingle Bells” with one finger on a toy piano as a toddler. But it wasn’t until his mother Devi discovered the Music Academy for Special Learners in Ronkonkoma, Long Island, that Jason had the opportunity to actually learn to play the piano.

Emma Katapodis, a 16-year-old girl with Charge Syndrome—a genetic disorder that typically causes profound hearing and vision loss, developmental and growth delays, and other serious abnormalities—had a similar experience. Emma was always drawn to music, able to pick up a tune and play it on the keyboard despite her severe hearing and visual loss by putting her head to the keyboard and feeling the vibrations. However, it was only when her mother Jennifer Katapodis learned about the Music Academy—founded by Touro Graduate School of Education alumnus Maria LaMon—from a friend that piano lessons became feasible for the first time in Emma’s life.

“Emma needed an environment where people would be able to meet her special needs, understand her and give her time to process the lessons and think, and where they would utilize a different approach to teach her,” says Ms. Katapodis. After taking lessons for just two months, Emma had already learned the notes and the keys and was learning how to read music, enhancing her ability to play by ear. “It’s just a very supportive, nurturing and educational environment for Emma,” Ms. Katapodis says.

Ms. LaMon combined her piano skills, honed from 12 years of piano lessons, and her special education expertise developed during her studies for a master of science degree in general education and special education at Touro’s Bay Shore campus and her

student teaching at Long Island’s Developmental Disabilities Institute to open the Music Academy in collaboration with her childhood piano teacher Sandra Kane in September 2007.

They ran the program out of Ms. Kane’s home until September 2008 when they rented a small office building on Smithtown Boulevard in Ronkonkoma that contains three classrooms and a waiting area. “I was thinking about how autistic kids learn academically and I was reading a lot about the connection between music and autism and that’s what gave me the idea,” says Ms. LaMon, who graduated from Touro in 2006 with a specialization in childhood education grades 1-6. “I wanted to combine the two things I love the most—music and working with special needs children. There was nothing out there and I still don’t think there’s anything out there for these kids to learn piano and take extracurricular activities as our non-special needs children do.”

Ms. LaMon may be right. The National

Autism Association and the Autism Society of America both said they were unaware of any other music programs or schools that had developed piano instruction techniques specifically for children with autism.

The Music Academy for Special Learners utilizes the ABA (applied behavioral analysis) techniques that are typically most effective in teaching children with autism, which Ms. LaMon learned during her courses at Touro and teacher training at DDI's campus in Little Plains, Long Island. She also relies heavily on audio and visual teaching tools that have proven successful with children with autism.

For example, the piano keys are labeled with the letters of the notes they represent and Ms. LaMon's piano books depict the letters of the notes in large bold print inside enlarged depictions of the notes themselves. Ms. LaMon plays games with her students to help them learn piano through a multi-sensory approach. She asks her students to match velcro letter cutouts to the same letters on the piano keys, to place large circular letter cutouts on the corresponding notes on treble and bass staves drawn on a large board in a 'Name that Note' game, to shine a flash-



Maria LaMon helps student Christopher Tartamella learn music notes

the games and letter labeling techniques to teach the students how to play piano first in order to build up their confidence. "With traditional piano lessons, there is a lot of theory thrown at a student," she says. "They learn scales, note reading and note values. It's a very rote way of teaching piano. But we teach our students how to play piano first and then we teach them a lot of theory through game play. When they first come to piano lessons, a lot of kids are resistant and are afraid they're going to fail before they even start. My whole theory is if I can show them they can do it, it motivates them. It sets them up for success and gives them a sense of accomplishment."

"such success with these children," Ms. LaMon says.

With an undergraduate degree in computer information systems from Dowling College in Oakdale, Long Island, Ms. LaMon worked in the field at MetLife for 13 years. After taking about seven years off to raise her two young children and working part time in her local school district as a teacher's assistant/paraprofessional, Ms. LaMon decided to go back to school at the age of 40 for a master's degree in education.

"I picked Touro because it was very convenient," she says. "The Bay Shore campus is right down the road from my house and the hours were perfect. They

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light on the letters depicted on the piano keys and then on those same letters scattered around the room in a treasure hunt game, and to jump on the correct notes on a giant keyboard on the floor.

"I put this program together based on how the kids learn academically," says Ms. LaMon. "We have a lot of kids who are used to ABA techniques, which are utilized throughout the piano lesson. It helps keep them focused and on task." Ms. LaMon also utilizes flash cards that depict the treble and bass symbols and piano notes in discrete trials—an ABA teaching tool that requires repeated instruction. She asks the students to play the correct note with the correct hand depicted on the flash card.

As opposed to typical piano lessons in which theory is taught first and then students learn how to play, Ms. LaMon utilizes

Ms. LaMon has filed a patent and registered trademark on the Visual Music Concepts teaching methodology she has developed. She is also working with a company that is packaging her piano teaching program as a box set including a music book, flash cards, all her games and an instructional CD so that piano teachers and parents everywhere can buy the program and utilize it to teach children with autism and developmental disabilities. She expects the box set teaching program to be available for purchase later this year and she also hopes to eventually open a branch of the Music Academy in Nassau County.

In addition, Ms. LaMon recently started an art program for children with autism at the Music Academy. Long Island artist Kim Zmarthie is teaching drawing, painting and clay modeling and having

offered Sunday classes and intersession classes. Going on Sunday was so convenient for me because I worked during the week."

It was during her teaching training at DDI during her last semester at Touro that Ms. LaMon realized her true passion was to work with children with autism. "I worked in several different places but it was when I worked at DDI with children with autism that I realized where my heart was."

Ms. LaMon, now 47, credits Touro for contributing to her success. "I learned ABA from working at DDI and doing my student teaching there. But one of the biggest things I gained from the professors at Touro, especially in the special needs classes, was how to teach outside the box. What the teachers at Touro gave me can't

be learned from a book. A lot of the teachers I had at Touro were very creative in how they taught their classes and I think that helped me and gave me the confidence and inspiration to be creative in my own ways.”

For some students, the Music Academy offers the opportunity to simply learn piano and participate in an extracurricular activity, which would not otherwise be available to them. “Eventually I think I’ll see therapeutic benefits but for right now it’s something fun for Christopher instead of all of his therapies and school activities,” says Maria Tartamella, mother of the 10-year-old Music Academy student on the autistic spectrum who lives in South Setauket, Long Island. “It’s difficult to find extracurricular activities for kids with special needs and this is an opportunity for him. He has an interest in music and he always did.”

For his part, Christopher definitely enjoys the experience. “It’s like Beethoven and I like the way Ms. Maria sings,” he says.

For other Music Academy students, there is a whole other dimension of academic and therapeutic benefits ranging from improved learning to language development to hand-eye coordination. “The piano lessons have helped Jason a lot with OT and his fine motor skills,” says his mother Devi Metzger. “In school he had a hard time holding a pencil; now he’s gotten a lot better and he writes pretty well. He is also focusing more for longer periods. He wasn’t able to sit longer than 10 minutes. Now we sit and do homework for an hour.

“And he speaks so much more as well,” Ms. Metzger added. “He hardly talked that much when he started here. Even in school, they’ve noticed a big difference. From what I’ve read, there is a huge connection between music and language. It’s all neurologically stimulating and it has a calming effect as well.”

Ms. LaMon and one of her piano teachers, Eric Damast, noted that many of their students with autism have a natural talent for music, memorization and perfect pitch—the unique ability to hear and identify tones without seeing them visually. “I’ve noticed that when children on the (autistic) spec-



Ms. LaMon assists Christopher with piano note recognition

trum learn a piece of music, they have it memorized sometimes the next week, whereas with non-special needs children, the memorization is harder. In that respect some of them learn more quickly,” says Mr. Damast.

Added Ms. LaMon, “They also have a natural ear. In the past year, we’ve had six children on the spectrum with perfect pitch or close to perfect pitch. In contrast, my partner Sandy has had maybe one or two non-special needs children with perfect pitch over the past 35 years of teaching. It’s really fascinating how music is a part of their natural abilities.”

With the impact Ms. LaMon has seen the piano lessons make on the cognitive and speech development of children with autism, she is surprised music is not utilized more frequently in special schools and classes for children with autism. “We’re able to do things through music that makes these kids feel great about themselves. Some kids will sing an entire song from start to finish. And sometimes we hear more language out of them in those 30-minute piano lessons than their parents and teachers do the whole day. A lot of these autistic kids have such a huge connection with music that the schools should be focusing more on a music program with these kids. It feels like a gap; a need for parents who notice their kids have an ability with music.”

While music therapy is more typical for students with special needs, it is more of a therapeutic technique that doesn’t necessarily allow children to learn to play an instrument, says Mr. Damast. “Here it’s more about hands-on learning. It’s more instructional but therapeutic as well.”

Mr. Damast, who also teaches typically developing students full-time at the Great Neck Conservatory for Music, says teaching special needs students has become a “new-

found calling” for him. “This is very consecrated work in a way,” he says. “You have to treat it as something that is a huge responsibility. You’re there as a guide and a mentor for these children and it’s not to be taken lightly at all.”

Currently about 40 children learn piano weekly at the Music Academy. Ms. LaMon also recently started a new group socialization and rhythm class that utilizes hand-held puppets and Orff instruments to teach students socialization through music.

Last spring, Steven Heinz, one of the Music Academy’s students who suffers from PDD, a mild form of autism, played at NYSSMA (The New York State School Music Association)—a highly competitive event for music students in which they play in front of a judge and get graded on their performance. He received a perfect score of 28 out of 28.

The Music Academy held its first recital for special needs students in 2008 and the second one last June. In its first recital, 12 children with autism played together with some 65 typical students in an integrated show at the Setauket Neighborhood House, a historic home used for events and functions. Last June, 35 special needs students played with 85 typically developing students at the same venue.

“We wanted to bring that sense of normalcy; that all of our music students should play in the same show,” says Ms. LaMon. “There wasn’t a dry eye in the house. The sense of accomplishment these kids felt was priceless.”

While Ms. LaMon initially thought she would work as a more ‘typical’ school district special education teacher upon graduating from Touro, she is thrilled that she founded the Music Academy and credits Touro College for providing her with the skills and education to do so. “Touro trained me to be creative, understanding and to think outside of the box, which gave me the skills, expertise and confidence to start the Music Academy. Thanks to Touro, I’m combining the two things I love doing most and am making a career out of it and I couldn’t be happier.” ■

For more information about the Music Academy, contact Maria LaMon at 631-615-6707 or visit www.speciallearnerpiano.com

