

Harmonikids Hohner-sponsored Session at Snowden Cottage, June 9, 2011

Harmonikids is a humanitarian non-profit organization that provides music therapy to kids with a wide variety of special challenges. Harmonikids programs oftentimes focus on youth who have been abandoned, neglected, abused, and/or are at gang risk – including some who have gotten in trouble and have been admitted to correctional facilities. In a Hohner sponsored session on June 9, 2011, I visited Snowden Cottage in Wilmington Delaware; a secure juvenile facility for boys whose mission is to *“provide educational and therapeutic services to adjudicated youth in a safe, staff-secure and gender sensitive environment preparing them for successful re-entry into the community.”*

This was not my introduction to Snowden. Part of my adolescence was spent within a few miles of its door. In fact, back then, the name of the adjacent full-security juvenile facility, “Ferris School for Boys” was sometimes mentioned by adults as a deterrent to keep kids from getting into trouble – and more than once in my youth I heard; “keep it up Gary and you’ll wind up in Ferris.” This was about the same time as when I discovered solace in playing music on a harmonica, which may have actually saved me from that path. Consequently, I’ve made it a personal mission to provide the youth there the proven benefits of my Harmonikids programs. Ironically, I did “wind up there”, though it was many years later as a teacher.

I arrived at Snowden Cottage in the afternoon just after lunch. There were 14 African American boys held there as juveniles, aged 15-16. They were on bathroom break - a closely supervised procedure – when I arrived, so I had time to set up by arranging 14 chairs facing my direction. When the boys returned they were instructed to sit and listen. Of course my presence was met with the usual looks of apprehension and wariness, but there was also an air of nervous curiosity. The tension was relieved only slightly as I explained I was a professional musician there to provide a fun session in which they would be entertained, receive harmonicas and learn to play songs on them. As always in facilities such as this, I sensed strong trust issues and many of the boys’ postures remained defensive with crossed arms and cold stares... at least until I played.

I started by telling them that I grew up very close by, but that now I live in Hollywood, California. I proceeded to share my accomplishments both as a professional musician and the director of Harmonikids. This aroused new interest. Questions like, “Are you famous?” “What kinda car you drive?” and “What kinda house you live in?” quickly dissipated when I played a song along with my “band” - a Blues “jam track” on my laptop. Suddenly all that mattered was the music, and many began actually clapping along enthusiastically. I followed by performing my song “Untrainable”; an acrobatic solo harmonica train song in which I play two harmonicas simultaneously, energetically whistling and chugging to speedy crescendo, and then lurching to a stop. This brought wide grins, and even giggles while I played, followed by unanimous applause at the end of the song. It was a real ice-breaker, and through Harmonikids programs I always witness this constant universal result. It seems that the magical sound of this small instrument cupped in my hands transcends all barriers, and draws the same joyful reaction from kids of all backgrounds and cultures, who face all sorts of challenges and tough predicaments. I had their trust and attention. It was time to teach them.

When I asked the boys what kind of music they liked, their reply was unanimous, “Rap”. Of course this was the answer I anticipated. I proceeded to play “Bo Diddley’s “ Billboard chart topping 1955 hit “I’m A Man”, explaining (as Bo had been heard to explain himself) though it is a Blues tune, it was one of the original Rap songs. Indeed, the song has the structure and all the attitude, and bawdiness of a Rap song, and then some... all revolving around the most famous harmonica riff ever created. Though they liked it, more than one boy called it “old school”. Quickly I put on a Rap song, “Bridging the Gap” by Rap artist Nas, which uses exactly the same famous harmonica riff. The lyrics talk about “bridging the gap from Blues, to Jazz, to Rap”. The boys recognized the artist and understood the message and were now

fully engaged. When asked if they were ready to play, their response was unanimous and eager, “yeah... that one!”

Hohner sponsored my visit and donated 14 “Bluesband” model harmonicas for the session. None of the boys had ever owned a harmonica, let alone played music on one. When the shiny new instruments were in their hands, there was a new excited energy in the air. Through my Harmonikids method I had the boys playing the first simple tune in less than 30 seconds – instant gratification at its best. They were surprised and thrilled at the discovery of their newfound skill, and the room buzzed with excitement. Though at first apprehensive of the many notes on the beloved gospel tune “When the Saints Go Marching in”, they were delighted to also breeze through it and their self-confidence soared. When we got to “I’m a Man” they were more than ready to play the Blues. They quickly learned not only the riff, but also the accompanying beat. They became so proficient at it that I invited a couple of self-proclaimed rappers in the group to take turns rapping while the other boys played and kept the beat. The result was magic. They giggled like little kids as they took turns expressing their frustrations, boasting, and comically teasing each other through raw and uncensored song. Even the directors got a kick out of their musicality and creative banter. They had so much fun that the session went overtime. When we had to quit, the boys expressed concern that they would not be able to keep and play the harmonicas. I assured them that they were a gift. The director instructed them that although they could not keep the harps in their pockets (a security issue), their names would be written on them and time would be allotted for them to practice.

The Harmonikids Hohner-sponsored program introduced to the boys at Snowden Cottage a positive form of creative expression and release at a crucial time in their lives. It is evident that the experience helped to elevate their self-esteem. In program manager Stephanie Guiswite’s words, “The boys really enjoyed listening as well as learning how to play the harmonica. For many of the youth in our program, this was their first experience in meeting a professional musician and learning about the influence of harmonicas on different musical genres. You never know what will inspire a youth to change or what may influence their future endeavours.”

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