

Harmonikids Hohner-sponsored Session

Denier Youth Services Center September 30, 2011

On September 30, 2011 I entered the Denier Youth Services Center in Durango, Colorado to the sound of the locks of double electronic doors clicking behind me. I had walked into a full-security strict disciplinary environment designed to rehabilitate kids who had lost their way and were being held there by court order. Sadly, though they had taken a wrong turn, most of these kids are there ultimately as a result of abandonment, neglect, abuse, and/or violent childhood environments. Their confidence and self-esteem are likely shaken if not shattered – leaving them feeling broken, hopeless, and trapped with no way out. I checked my driver's license at the front desk for a background check, and made my way through more locking doors to the “pod” where the youth assembled. The tension and apprehension in the room was palpable as they were ordered to sit at attention. As they waited uneasily for me to start my presentation, admittedly I had to fight my own feelings of claustrophobia. The only cheer I felt in the room came from the sunny disposition of Christina McMunn, the dedicated director of Denier's education program. I began the session and within minutes lessons from music made on harmonicas changed all of that.

Harmonikids provides youth such as these a healthy and positive form of creative expression and emotional release in this crucial time in their lives. Simply stated, the lessons often become an inspiration for these adolescents to grow, change, forgive the world – and themselves. The harmonica often becomes a strong but gentle tool to help kids get back on track. Long ago I learned to never underestimate the power of using music and the harmonica as a magical instrument to reach out and make a difference in young lives. The following letters from the Denier Center remind me how truly profound that effect can be – in their own words. Their eloquence and honesty are astounding.

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LETTER FROM THE DIRECTOR:

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Gary,

Words cannot truly express the impact that you and your harmonicas have had at this facility. Each year we look forward to (special events) but when I told my students about a “new, unique harmonica clinic” the reactions were mixed. Many of my students have severe behavioral issues such as anger, fighting, abuse, etc. Others have had tremendous family issues and still others have lived with drug abuse & addictions for many years. They come to us with extremely low self-esteem and huge gaps in their education. To be honest, 100% of students have huge gaps in their childhoods. I often find it heartbreaking to know that no one ever sang to them, or played “Pat-a-Cake” with them, read nursery rhymes/ stories to them, or taught them to play an instrument.

I knew that they would initially react differently but what was truly amazing was the transformation from the beginning to the end. I saw students, who usually shut-down when they can’t do something, actually choose differently and move on, catch up or just laugh at themselves & have fun. I saw students who love music identify a new way to make it, a new door of opportunity. I saw students humbled by the act of service & caring by Hohner when they found out they could keep their harmonicas. By the end, they didn’t want you to leave and several students were feverishly writing down quotes from you that they connected with (some- to follow in their “Thank Yous”). We have practiced several times already and have actually made plans to be more regular with group & individual practices. They are experiencing the joy of making music, messing up, fixing the mess & moving on and a great many life lessons. Please pass along our most sincere thanks to Hohner as well as the following notes of gratitude from the students.

Sincerely thankful,

Christina A McMunn

Durango 9-R Schools-DeNier Multi-disciplinary Educator SAC

LETTERS FROM THE YOUTH:

Dear Gary,

I would just like to thank you for coming to Denier and playing the harmonica for us. I really didn't ever think about playing harmonica before you came. I didn't think that I could ever even learn how to play it. When you play you make it look so simple. After you gave us the harmonicas and showed us how to play I really enjoyed it. I have played a few times since then and I just about have "You Are My Sunshine" down. Every time we get to play them I play it and just think about your grandfather. He must have been a great man. Even just how you talked to us made me feel human again. You didn't talk down at us but you actually gave some personal experiences in life and it looked like you were really affected by coming here. You weren't showing sympathy, but instead you were showing empathy just trying to put yourself in our shoes. I really appreciate you coming here and teaching us about the harmonicas. When you said to keep trying and don't give up on ourselves I really just wanted to walk up to you and shake your hand. You really recognized us for the positive things that we were doing and I would like to thank you.

Krys

Dear Mr. Allegretto,

Hello my name is Haden F. I would like to thank you for coming in and teaching me how to play a harmonica. It was very informing and before you came I thought it was just blowing into it but there is more to it than that. I enjoyed listening to you play and learning how to play. I'm glad that I got to learn and happy that I got a harmonica. Since we got harmonicas I have gotten better at playing and I plan on keeping it. After you left I have seen a harmonica as an art form just like other music, or paintings. In either one you can express your emotions. I liked how you talked about it being an art form and about how it's

dying. I can relate it to other things and I can understand you. Thanks for your quote about falling and getting back up it's pretty motivational and I know exactly what you mean by it and I plan on getting back on my feet. Once again thank you for coming.

Haden

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Dear, Gary Allegretto,

Before your visit to our facility, I really didn't think much about playing a harmonica. But when I heard you play, it was AWESOME!! I never knew that you could play harmonica slowly, or fast, or at an even pace and still get a song and it sounds cool. I enjoyed your stories, your lesson and your little ear trick! After the clinic, I was dedicated, still am, to playing the harmonica. When I get out and when I'm at home just lounging around, I will pull out the harmonica you donated to me. I really appreciated you coming in if I did not say that already. I like that "Shave and a haircut" one the most because on the outs, after somebody says something funny, I can make it even more funny with the Duh duh duh dun..Dun duh. It will rule! I wish they would let us keep them in our rooms. But oh well. I will have plenty of time to play on the outside. Also I think it is a great instrument to start playing because not very many people play the harmonica where I am from. That will be like a skill I have and share with others. One thing you said really got to me though, it was the "When you mess up a note or something. Throw it out the window. And keep playing. Because practice makes you better but not perfect". Thank you for coming, I really really liked to hear you play. And let the company know I said Thank you as well. You've provided me with a skill to show off and practice. Thank you Mr. Allegreto, or Mr. G! I remember we called you that.

Thank you again.

Ari (like R E)

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Thank you Mr. Allegretto!

I'm student athlete Cindy and would like to give my appreciation to you for everything you have done. Before you came I never knew how to play on a harmonica other than to blow on it! Laugh out loud! It was an amazing experience for me, I learned a lot. I plan on taking my experience to show all of my friends and family what I have learned. One thing I will not forget is that you said "You still learn something new everyday, 40 years later and you still are persistent with what you enjoy. With that I look up to you. You have been a very positive impact on my life and I want to say thanks to you for giving us your time and wisdom and Hohner for donating the harmonicas.

Sincerely,

Nguyen

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Thank you for coming to Robert E. DeNier youth service center to teach us harmonica. Before you came to the facility I thought that harmonica was a simple instrument without much potential to be very entertaining, so I never spent much thought on it. After you came though I realized that it can be a very exciting instrument and would be extremely fun to learn. I also thought it was pretty cool how you taught it, the pamphlet was very easy to follow, and your demonstrations were interesting too. I also liked your trick that you did with the tiny harmonica and made us think you played out of your ear. So again I say, thank you for coming and brightening our bland lives in the facility and thanks to Hohner for providing us with the harmonicas.

Sincerely,

Kalab

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Dear Gary Allegretto,

I appreciate you coming here to Denier, and teaching us about harmonicas. I never really liked harmonicas because they made me feel like I was just made to be a prisoner and the music was really

sad when I would play. My feelings about them really never changed but they really are annoying. You were a very good teacher to taught me well I learned a lot about them the can be interesting if you're into musician stuff. I truly appreciate you coming and I would like to thank you for your time shared with us and I am sorry I am not really that interested in them but it was nice to learn something new.

So thank you for the harmonicas. We all thank you for everything you shared for us at your presentation.

Sincerely,

Janay

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YO, Mister Allegretto,

I appreciate you coming to show me how to boogie with the harmonica. I think your grandpa would be proud with how good I can play you are my sunshine. I hope you're proud too because I would've never touched a harmonica if you hadn't encouraged me to play. Before you came I never thought the harmonica was an instrument. I only saw it as a toy that you only blew in and out of to make a train noise. Now I understand that it is an instrument. I think its cool how you try to keep the music alive. I think its happening with a lot of genres now. Hip-hop is dying too. People try to call certain music hip-hop but some people don't understand is that it is an art; a form of expression and much of the time tell stories just like country/cowboy music. The two genres have a lot in common when many people think they are the complete opposite. I took in what you said about learning from your mistakes and moving on. I don't plan on coming back here ever again, unless I'm visiting like the way you did. I don't think ill ever be a pro like you, but I am capable of playing simple songs and Phat Notes. I'm better at floetry. I use the instrument I was born with best and I do have a similar goal as you, which is to keep the music alive and keep the music from being deformed or manipulated into something its not.

Keep on playing those Phat Notes. Keep the music alive.

Kenny

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Dear Mr. G,

Thank you for coming in to teach us about playing the harmonica. Before you came I thought the harmonica was not that fun and now that I know how to play some songs with the harmonica I think that it is a fun thing to do. I liked the song my little sunshine and your grandfather would be proud of you for teaching us how that song. Again thank you for taking your time to come out hear and teach us how fun the harmonica is and bring us those harmonicas for us to practice with.

Thank you soooo much,

Amber

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Dear Mr. G

Hello sir, thank you for coming to my home it was very cool I thought that harmonicas were dumb but now I think there alright just hard to play n stuff... I appreciate you and thanks I think that it was nice for you to come and share you talent with "us" I also liked how you put a part of your personal life in there "like how u played my little sunshine for your grandfather(=,

Thanks-

Lane

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Dear Gary Allegretto,

My feelings about the presentation have not changed from when you came because I have enjoyed the cowboy poet thing for the past three years I think that it is amazing that Skyler and you and the other guests choose to come here so we can enjoy something different than the program and country music will not die because I will take

your word on it and make my own country music because remember life is full of mess ups you just got to fix the mess ups.

Sincerely,

Dakota

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Dear Mr. G

I feel that harmonicas were lame, but after you where done and you showed what harmonicas could really do I thought they were really cool. So thank you for coming and visiting us.

Ramey

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Dear Mr. Allegretto,

Hello Mr. Allegretto how you doing? I S/A Sandoval just want to say thank you fro coming in the ROP to teach us how to play the harmonica. That was a treat to all of us. Before you came in the facility, I did not know how to play the harmonica, all I know was to blow in the holes, but you came in and taught me how to use my fingers to find a the holes to make a sound that was cool to hear. So I thank you for it. I was really impressed how you could play three harmonicas at the same time. I also like the quote you said about messing up. "If you fail keep trying and move on" The quote goes a long way. I also enjoyed how to play with the other students. To this day I would like to play all the song you gave us. I can play Red River Valley really well. So I really enjoyed you coming in, and also giving us a harmonica.

Thank You, Sincerely,

Gilbert

P.S. Cowboy up and keep it strong - as well as grabbing life by the horns.

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Gary,

When you came to this place to play the harmonica for us I was very happy and couldn't wait for you to start and play for us. Harmonicas are beautiful things, and you can do very awesome things with harmonicas. When you were done playing I even had deeper emotions for harmonicas. With harmonicas you can share emotions that make people want to cry. When you were done playing my emotions for harmonicas became very deep and sincere. Since you came here you showed me that there are awesome things in the world that will keep me out. You impacted me very much with your words and playing. Thank you very much for coming. You are a very great man and I hope will be in touch soon, so that you can teach me things about the harmonica, even though I know that I will never be as good as you.

Thank You,

William

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