



Neptune Beach Elementary School: Music Program for Special Needs Children

By Peggy McGuinness

Photos provided by Karen Demuth

The special-needs wing at Neptune Beach Elementary School (NBES) is a non-profit organization that "teaches and cares for special needs children with physical, cognitive and medical disabilities -- so they can grow and function to the best of their ability" says Karen Demuth, mother of special needs student Dante Demuth. Karen was the catalyst for the school's current "Connecting thru Music" program for special needs kids, and Principal Elizabeth Kavanagh and Exceptional Student Education (ESE) Site Coach Marylou Darcy agree that parents like Karen play a vital role in fund-raising and other support efforts for the wing. "Karen," says Ms. Kavanagh, "has taken the lead on many such efforts."

NBES has a seven-classroom wing with teachers, paraprofessionals, therapists and nurses dedicated to a group of moderately to severely handicapped students. "Approximately 30% of the children served by this organization are from the beaches with 18% being from Atlantic Beach," Karen says. The "Connecting thru Music" program was started for children in that wing about a year and a half ago. Until then, Dante, who has been attending the school since age three, his mother says, "didn't have much focus or interest in anything except battery-operated toys. He is non-verbal, partially blind, partially deaf and medically fragile," she says, "and was born without an esophagus."

Six months before NBES established the music program at Karen's request, she had introduced her son to Kindermusik, a national organization that helps children learn and discover through music. She says "His world lit up. Instead of playing with just battery-operated toys, he would pick up and play xylophones, guitars, and ukuleles, distributing them around the room to people, dancing while they played." She saw such a change in Dante that she asked Mrs. Kavanagh to start the special needs music program. Karen says, "The results of the program have been amazing for my son and so many other children at the school. The teachers see a difference, the parents see a difference, and it is truly inspiring," says Karen—and both Mrs. Kavanagh and Ms. Darcy agree."

"Connecting thru Music," is run "entirely by donations," Karen says. "By helping us support the music program, the public is making a difference in these exceptional children's lives, and we need their continued support to sustain it. The program provides weekly music classes for each of the seven classrooms where a "Bach to Rock" or "Kindermusik" teacher comes in and engages the children in learning through music.

Today an additional music therapy program is being considered to supplement Connecting thru Music. It is based upon extensive research-based literature that indicates children, especially those with special needs, have increased efficacy in learning with music therapy, especially when paired with other therapies such as speech, physical and occupational.

The latest music therapy program would entail hiring a certified music therapist to use data and documentation that ensures learning is occurring and children are meeting goals based on their Individual Education Plans (IEPs). Karen says it's evident that learning is happening already, "so combining the current joy-based music program with an actual music therapy program would be amazing for our special needs children." She points out that fund-raising for this will be critical and that Nemours, Wolfson's and the special needs public school programs in Ponte Vedra all have music therapy programs operated by grants and sponsorships.

NBES will conduct a 10-week pilot to obtain data for the music therapy program as part of their fundraising efforts, according to Principal Kavanagh. "The philosophy is to enhance the learning and joy of our special children through music," Karen says. "Music reaches children with handicaps such as blindness, CP, non-verbal, Down Syndrome and immobility in ways that other therapies cannot." Details regarding the "May the 4th be with You" fund-raiser, including a concert, silent auction, instrument drive and more are on the Connecting thru Music Facebook page.



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