Finding joy through music

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Music Together is an educational music program founded in 1987 by Kenneth Guilmartin and Lili Levinowitz. Offered in countries around the world, the program is coming to Brainerd and Little Falls through Julia Schultz's Music Together North Lakes.

Schultz's inspiration to start her own program came from a personal experience: the loss of her second child.

"We actually lost a child, I think it was about eight weeks. We named the baby Avery," she said.

Schultz recalls losing her baby on a Friday. The following Tuesday, she attended a Music Together class with her son, Teddy.

"I remember, it was a really hard time dealing with that loss, and also then you're trying to parent a child," she said.

Schultz had always loved the classes, but that particular day, the experience took on a deeper meaning. It gave her an opportunity to enjoy time with her son while still grieving the loss of Avery.

"There was something that honestly maybe changed in my heart, changed just in my spirit," she said.

Amid the grief and heartache, she found a bright spot with her child.

"You could hold both of those things simultaneously," she said. "At that class I thought to myself, 'I want to do that.' I want to create something that is in my area, that is fun, that is enjoyable."

Schultz knew other families had experienced similar losses. The class helped her recognize that grief and happiness could exist together, and that making room for one did not mean forgetting the other.

"You have both the joy and sorrow walking hand in hand, and yet you can have a moment where you just get to play with your child," she said. "You just get to sing songs, be silly, not forget what's going on, but rather hold the space for both."

The experience gave Schultz a way to connect with Teddy during a difficult time.

“That was a really wonderful way for me to connect with my son, and also just have a moment of bright joy, just in a little bit of a season of sorrow,” she said.

Having found comfort in the program, Schultz wanted to offer that experience to other families. Her program serves children from birth through second grade.

Schultz earned a bachelor’s degree in music from the University of Minnesota. As an independent Music Together licensee, she will offer the Bells Collection in January.

“There are 12 different collections of music, and in each collection, there are about 23 songs,” she said.

Children and their families will learn the songs in her Little Falls and Brainerd classes. Families participating in Music Together elsewhere in the United States and in countries such as Italy and Mexico will learn the same collection.

“It’s a worldwide organization seeking to promote, again, a rich, diverse musical experience for children and families,” Schultz said.

Schultz plays piano and acoustic guitar, but her primary instrument is her voice, which she studied in college. She also plays some ukulele and taught herself to play the accordion, though she does not play it often.

A songwriter and longtime church musician, Schultz has performed and led music throughout Minnesota and Wisconsin.

She said families do not need musical experience or talent to participate. The classes offer an opportunity for parents and caregivers to connect with their children through music, regardless of how comfortable they feel singing or playing instruments.

Schultz especially wants to welcome those who think they cannot sing well, feel music is outside their comfort zone or did not grow up in a musical family.

“Those are actually the exact people that I want to invite into my classes,” she said.

For Schultz, participation matters more than how someone sounds. Parents and caregivers can help children engage with music by joining in themselves, whether in class, at home or in the community.

“The most important thing that parents and caregivers can do with their child, even if they don’t think they’re musical, is sing,” she said. “Our children want to hear our voices. They want to see us participating.”

Seeing adults take part in joyful musical experiences encourages children to become excited and involved, she said.

“That’s exactly what gets our children excited and engaged and want to participate,” Schultz said.

The experience does not end when families leave the classroom. Parents and caregivers can continue singing the songs and doing musical activities with their children at home.

“We’ve had parents sing all different sorts of things, but the songs are easily accessible, they’re repetitive, so parents can easily join in,” Schultz said.

When families enroll, they receive a code to access the Music Together app, a storybook and access to songs they can take home. Those materials help families bring the classroom experience into their daily routines.

Schultz has seen that happen in her own household. Her husband, Isaac Schultz, attended one class but was unable to continue attending.

“But we would play and sing the songs all the time at home, and now he is the one that actually will sing along and sing them to our child, which is so fun,” she said.

Schultz understands that some parents may hesitate to participate because of their background or how they think their voices sound. She encourages them to focus on enjoying the experience with their children.

“A key thing is to participate with joy, because that’s all our kids want to see,” she said.

Schultz will offer free demonstration classes at 3:30 and 4:30 p.m. Nov. 14 and Dec. 12 at Little Falls Middle School.

The demonstrations will follow the format of a typical class, giving families a chance to try the activities before enrolling.

“We’ll do a typical class, so you’ll have instrument play,” she said.

Activities will include songs incorporating small and large movements, a song with props, free dance, and hello and goodbye songs.

“So you’ll get to experience what a class will actually be like together,” Schultz said. “I’m inviting all families that are interested.”

Schultz said introducing children to music at an early age can support their development and help them build basic musical skills.

“It’s a non-performance-based setting to engage and experience music,” she said.

Children as young as 3 can develop basic musical competency, Schultz said. She encourages families to expose children to a variety of sounds, rather than only familiar children's songs.

"Even at 3, it's important to expose children to not just the typical children's music, which is in major keys, so happy-sounding keys, but also, different tonalities," she said.

That might include a song in a minor key, which listeners may describe as sounding sad, or songs with different meters and rhythmic patterns. Schultz said those varied experiences help children develop a foundation for understanding music.

"It's important to have our children exposed at a very early age, because that will help them set the foundation for their musical framework and their understanding," she said.

Music also offers a way to introduce children to different cultures. Schultz compares a varied musical experience to a diet that includes different foods and food groups.

"Another analogy I like to use, it's feeding them a rich diet, so to speak," she said. "You have different fats, proteins, carbs, different food groups, different foods from different cultures, so to speak."

A musical collection might include a song from East Africa, a song from Korea, jazz or a lullaby in a minor key. Together, those selections give children a range of musical experiences to explore.

"So having that musical diverse experience is so important for early childhood, specifically," Schultz said.

Schultz hopes families leave her classes feeling inspired and more connected through music. She also wants them to feel comfortable continuing the activities with their children at home.

For more information about Music Together North Lakes or to register for a demonstration class, visit www.musictogethernorthlakes.com.