UW-River Falls students, music program bridge gap between young and old

May 15, 2017--For Kyle Punt and a collection of other music education majors at the University of Wisconsin-River Falls, the River Falls chapter of the Harmony Bridge program has become the essence of hands-on learning.

“We don’t have to worry too much about being perfect. We are able to make some mistakes and learn from them,” said Punt. “With this program, we have a kind of sandbox to apply our ideas and then reflect on them afterwards.”

The program Punt, an instrumental music education major from Shakopee, Minn., is referring to is Harmony Bridge. The program, which aims to bring music into the lives of senior citizens by connecting them with a younger generation of musicians, was created after a chance encounter in South Dakota.

Program founder Mike Levine visited a nursing home after playing a concert with his band, Dallas Brass. While visiting, Levine broke out his trombone to play a few tunes for a 107-year-old resident. At one point, a nurse interrupted and urged him to peek into the hallway. Levine was surprised to see residents lining the halls in their wheelchairs, swaying and tapping along to his music. From there, Harmony Bridge was born.

After his experience, Levine felt called to bring music into the lives of senior care community residents and saw an opportunity to incorporate a significantly younger generation of musicians. Teaming school kids up at the community level, middle school band students gather to rehearse and perform specially arranged music for senior citizens in nursing homes and senior care communities. As a community-focused program, Harmony Bridge uses post-performance time as a time for students to spend interacting with residents.

For Punt and his fellow UW-River Falls students, the most beneficial part of the Harmony Bridge program isn’t the performance, but the preparation. UW-River Falls has partnered with Mike Fuller, band director at Meyer Middle School to connect Falcons with the River Falls chapter. UW-River Falls students lead rehearsals and work behind the scenes to coordinate the program. Keith Richardson, a music education major from Spooner, acknowledges the professional experience that he is gaining through the collaboration.

“We go into the middle school and direct rehearsals for the middle school students. We are involved and using our skills in other ways besides directing though,” he explains.
“We are communicating with the residence homes, connecting with parents, coordinating parental involvement, setting up performances, mentoring the students, lots of different things.”

Punt appreciates the “on-the-job” training he is receiving through his work with Harmony Bridge.

“For me, the best part about the program is being able to get out into a real world environment and really see what I’ll be doing for my career,” he said, while adding that the real highlight is watching the other parties experience the music. “I also find a lot of enjoyment in watching the students get excited about their music and what they’re doing. For the kids, they get to continue to practice and improve at their instruments. They have also expressed how much they enjoy bringing joy to the people at these retirement homes.”

While Punt, Richardson, and the other UW-River Falls students involved in the program are just getting their feet wet when it comes to music education, more seasoned professionals are seeing the benefits as well. Fuller and Paul Budde, an assistant professor of music at UW-River Falls, are responsible for the original connection between the university and community students. Fuller had heard about the program—which was still in its infancy—through the grapevine and was intrigued.

“I started thinking about how we could incorporate it here in River Falls. We wanted to make it multi-grade level, having older kids mentor younger kids. We thought about the university students and felt it might be a great opportunity for them to get hands-on experience with students prior to student teaching,” explains Fuller. “I connected with Dr. Budde from UWRF and it all happened from there.”

“We communicated with students,” he continues. “I presented the idea at a music education meeting, Keith started getting involved, and this UWRF connection has been the backbone of the River Falls chapter for a while.”

Six communities from around the country, spanning from New York to Wisconsin to Arkansas participate in the Harmony Bridge program, but River Falls is the first to bring college students into the mix.

“The connection piece is the most awesome aspect of this program. I think we’re the first area with the university connection in the mix. Harmony Bridge really is a chance to bridge generations,” said Budde. “The college students are a nice addition to the puzzle. Getting the college kids into local schools and then the interaction with elderly residents is a fantastic association.”

Budde recognizes that the mentoring UW-River Falls students provides as part of the program is beneficial to all students, young and old.
“Where we come in is the mentoring. When River Falls got involved with the program, they wanted us [UW-River Falls] involved. And it’s not just the mentoring, but the music education that we do,” he explains. “We pick rehearsal dates, middle school kids show up, they rehearse, we [UW-River Falls students] sit and play with them. It’s like a private lesson time where our music education students get to put into practice what they are learning in a classroom.”

Richardson says the structure of the program allows UW-River Falls students to put their education to use.

“We typically meet four times a month for rehearsals. The number of students that we are working with varies, sometimes it’s eight to ten, other weeks it’s 20 to 25. Harmony Bridge music is written and arranged in a manner where it’s interchangeable,” he explains. “We have flexibility depending on how many students and instruments we have. It’s been really valuable to me as a music education major to learn how to work adaptively and flexibly.”

Punt agrees. He just finished a semester of Introduction to Music and is already putting his education to use.

“We learn a lot about student learning and methods. I’m able to apply these things that I learn in class to what we’re doing with the kids at Harmony Bridge,” he said. “I think this program matters because it is a constructive outlet for those who want to go beyond the classroom when it comes to learning about how to be a band director or a music teacher.”

Fuller knows the experience the UW-River Falls students are gaining will be invaluable down the road.

“I think they have to process a lot of what’s happening. I’m not always in rehearsals,” said Fuller. “They have to troubleshoot on their own. They have to look forward, they have to plan based on what’s happened before. They have to get kids ready for performances.”

“It is valuable. It is even a lot more hands-on work than they would even have in a student teacher situation,” he continues, emphasizing the hands-on practical experience the students are earning. “It’s very much like a real world experience. They’re not confined to student teaching checklists. They’re not confined to ‘here’s what you have to do.’ It’s different. Our goal is to take the tools you’ve learned and apply them right away to that goal without having certain strings attached, you don’t have to check off certain boxes. They just get to experience teaching music in a very pure form.”

For Budde, the benefits of the River Falls Harmony Bridge program extend beyond the teaching experience for music education majors.

“The outreach for us as a university and a music program is huge. It’s invaluable,” he said. “It’s a difference maker for our students. This experience is going to be incredibly
valuable when they look for jobs. They will already have that comfort level with working with kids, dealing with logistics, the intangibles on top of a technical musical education. It is fantastic for UW-River Falls students to have this opportunity.”

For now, Punt, Richardson, and their fellow music education majors continue to help bridge the generation gap between young musicians and elderly nursing home residents and Punt is keenly aware of the impact the Harmony Bridge program has.

“The middle school students have expressed how much they enjoy bringing joy to the people at these retirement homes,” he said. “For the senior citizens, they get to enjoy live music, something they may not typically experience. They also get to experience the unique joy of watching someone perform on something that they are learning and have yet to master. I think it reminds them of when they were young and learning all sorts of new things.”

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For more information on the Harmony Bridge program, visit harmonybridge.net or contact Paul Budde at 715-425-4079.

Photo: UW-River Falls music education student Kyle Punt, center, practices with Meyer Middle School sixth graders Claire Vaught, left, and Max Pnewski during an afternoon Harmony Bridge session. Photo by Kathy M Helgeson, UWRF.