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Landis Daniels and John Piper, instructor

photo by Chris Fritchie

The Sweet Sounds of Success

By Susan Mardele

MUSIC IS ALIVE AND WELL IN FRISCO, especially at the Music Conservatory of Texas (MCOT). With a beautiful new building designed for teaching music and more than 500 students at the Frisco location alone, MCOT is definitely a going concern. But success has many measures and a thriving business is only one of them.

Take Logan Ford for example. Logan has been taking private piano lessons at MCOT since he was four years old. He is now 12 and has his own definition of musical success. "It was really fun in school because I got to show my friends new pieces and that helped me be friends with them, actually talk to them about something and get to know them better," Logan says. "It also helped me do a lot better in school. Since I've memorized so much music, it helps me with other things

like poems that we have to memorize for school."

Kim Guz is mother to Jolie, 10, and JR, eight. The family started with Kindermusik classes when JR was two and Jolie was four. Of JR's success at MCOT, Ms. Guz says, "He's not the type to get on the phone and talk, but during recital he can get on the stage and play a song perfectly in front of all those people. That amazes me. I think that is definitely a good thing for his confidence."

MANAGEMENT HARMONY

Chris Duncan and Steve South are partners in MCOT's two locations. When asked who is president of the school, Ms. Duncan and Mr. South look at each other with a kind of visual shrug, as if it doesn't matter much. Ms. Duncan says, "We're owners of both locations. I'm the

president." Mr. South laughs and says, "I do what she tells me."

Before opening the school, Ms. Duncan was an independent piano teacher working from her home "forever." With a Piano Pedagogy (teaching) degree and an "in-the-box" management style for her own business, she was well-equipped to teach and manage a school. According to her young students – and their moms – Ms. Duncan's approach has a lot of families coming back for more.

Anne Ford, Logan's mom, has had Logan at the school virtually since the doors opened. "I love Chris. Chris is exuberant. I've sat in on some classes for parent observation. She has me wanting to take lessons because she's so fun," says Ms. Ford. "I think the biggest thing about the school is that they have such a commitment to the youth. They work so

hard keeping things fresh and interesting and different to keep the kids wanting to take lessons.”

Ms. Duncan conceived the idea for the school when her two sons wanted to expand their musical education from piano to other instruments. She found it difficult to find teachers, take her children to different lessons at different times and keep track of lesson fees. She asked herself, “Why can’t I find a place to take my kids for the kind of lessons they really want but still have things handled professionally? In other words, the teacher’s going to be there at 4:30 on Thursday,” says Ms. Duncan.

Mr. South was a businessman who had a construction company for almost 20 years and then the computer field. He now handles the business details of MCOT like advertising, marketing and accounting. He also designed and managed the construction of MCOT’S new building.

Mr. South’s face lights up when he talks about the school and the students, “This is the greatest thing in the world. Some of our teachers are just incredible.

They might have some spare time and they’re practicing...just really incredible stuff,” says Mr. South. “In piano when we have our recitals and the students start to hit that third year, your mouth drops. It’s a progression of really learning and understanding an instrument. It’s no longer thinking how to play it but playing it.”

They work as hard keeping things fresh and interesting and different to keep the kids wanting to take lessons.

A WINNING COMPOSITION

From her experience as a piano teacher and as a mom, Ms. Duncan designed MCOT’s services to meet the needs of Frisco families. The larger school atmosphere provides benefits not available

in a single-teacher environment. If a teacher is absent, another can substitute; students are exposed to multiple instruments; group and performance experiences are readily available; and many instruments can be taught at one location.

The MCOT staff does everything possible to conveniently schedule lessons for multiple students in the same family. “If one child is in piano lessons and the other child wants guitar, and maybe mom wants voice lessons...what if you want to do all those in the same afternoon, right over here at the school?” says Ms. Duncan.

It must be working. MCOT has grown steadily since its doors opened in 2000. The school started in a leased facility almost across the street from its present Preston Road location. In 2004, Ms. Duncan and Mr. South added a Flower Mound location. Next, MCOT purchased land in Frisco and built its present building, moving in January of 2006.

Mr. South designed the 7,000 square foot building, planning extra insulation for soundproofing, an efficient reception



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*Omar Urrutia & Gave Dehotas, instructor
photo by Chris Frütchie*

area, 28 practice rooms and a recital hall that at capacity can seat 175 people. The recital hall has sound-proof partitions that make the space usable during non-performance times for individual instruction, group lessons and smaller performance groups.

MUSIC ENJOYMENT STARTS AT BIRTH

The joy of music knows no age, so MCOT offers something for everyone. As early as just after birth, a child can come to a Kindermusik class with mom for music and movement. Studies have shown multiple benefits of musical education for the very young including self-esteem, memory, math skills and much more. Around the age of four, a child can usually begin individual instruction.

Unless a child is highly focused on another instrument, Ms. Duncan often recommends piano as a “foundation” instrument for learning about music and music theory. “Any musician will tell you



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that if you have the piano background, you are just more familiar with how all music is put together," she says. "It's usually easier to pick up another instrument."

TWEENS AND TEENS ROCK

For tweens and teens, music is a great emotional outlet, a safe social environment and a platform for constructive experimentation.

Anne Ford has watched Logan use his music for emotional release. "There were times when he would be really frustrated at school. He would sit at the piano and work out some psychological things that were going on. My initial focus was, gee, this will be really good for his math, but it's more than that. It's not only a discipline, but a pleasure and an emotional release."

Haley Flagg, now 16, came to MCOT about three years ago wanting to learn electric guitar. "I've always been kind of interested in the guitar. At first I wanted to play the electric guitar, but my mom said I should start with classical. Now that I've started playing classical, I like it better than electric. I really like Celtic music. I wouldn't be able to play it without classical guitar."

MCOT offers a summer camp especially for young people with a yen for rock and roll. It's called "Day RockerZ," and Logan Ford attended. "We split into two bands, then we started out picking songs. We also wrote a song. It was fun to work together on writing the songs and making the band name." The Rebels, Logan's band, learned and performed "When I Come Around" by Green Day and "You Really Got Me" by Van Halen.

JUST MOON RIVER PLEASE

Adults come for lessons as well. Some-

times it is to polish skills learned during childhood piano lessons. Sometimes it is to learn a particular piece of music. Kim Guz wanted to play the theme from "Ice Castles." "I used to be able to play it really well when I was a teenager, but when I

don't like."

The school environment expands the students' musical universe. Ms. Duncan says, "Lots of students see somebody playing another instrument and say, 'Wow, mom, can I try that too?' The students

who are here, waiting in the lobby for their lesson see somebody walk by with a violin. Or somebody walks by with a guitar or a mandolin or a saxophone. This kind of environment really gets students excited about adding other instruments to their study," says Ms. Duncan.

Mr. South is fascinated with the students' musical journey. "We've seen it over and over again. They come in wanting to play three-chord rock and roll songs, really cool electric guitar. Once they realize it's just three chords, they want to play more than that.

They want to really understand it. I've seen them progress from playing rock and roll for six months to a year, going to classical, then into jazz. It's the difference in playing a three chord rock song and playing Miles Davis in jazz. It's night and day," says Mr. South.

MUSIC LIVES!

Yes, music is alive and well in Frisco. But there's more to it than the adult concerns of brain growth and social learning. What is it that has a child demand to lay hands on a piano or guitar...and then practice day after day after day? Mr. South has a really good answer. "Can you imagine the world without music? It is one of the base forms of communication. It transcends all of the languages and cultures. You can take it and go anywhere with it." And that, in a nutshell, spells a very bright musical future for Frisco families and MCOT.

Susan Mardele is a freelance writer living in Princeton.



Day RockerZ performance

photo provided by Music Conservatory of Texas

went back to it I could hardly play it at all. The teacher helped me work at my own pace on just that piece." Ms. Guz's husband had never taken piano lessons and took her adult piano class. The couple learned to play a simple duet together.

Even empty nesters come for lessons. Ms. Duncan says, "We have people who are looking for something to do for themselves. They're retired or the kids are grown. Think about all that great brain development."

MOM, CAN I TRY GUITAR TOO?

Students at MCOT can choose the music and the instruments they want to play. Whatever the instrument and no matter if the student is on the classical, jazz or rock track, Ms. Duncan makes sure each student gets the fundamentals. In each lesson, though, there is time for songs the student wants to learn. Jolie Guz approves, "I like how I get to choose the types of music that I want to play. They don't force me to play something that I