

YOUR CITY: MEET YOUR NEIGHBOR THE GOLD COAST YOUTH ORCHESTRA: IT'S ALL FOR THE KIDS

By Dawne Richards

Music brings people together. We've all heard that a million times, right? Nowhere is this more true than in the unlikely pairing of Tim Byrns and Donna Richards, an unlikely pair who formed a seemingly unshakable bond several years ago that led to the foundation of the Gold Coast Youth Orchestra.

Donna, a reserved, soft-spoken mom, remembers where it all started. "This was born," she told us, "out of frustration and necessity." Donna's son played the cello at Crystal Lake Middle School in eighth grade. He arrived for the first day of high school at Pompano Beach High only to learn that the orchestra had been done away with, and he was placed in chorus. He had no interest in singing and instead turned to baseball.

After awhile, the young Mr. Richards decided he'd played enough baseball. Okay, said his parents, but you will not sit in the house and play video games. Choose another sport or activity. Out came the cello again.

Donna engaged Tim to provide cello lessons. It's impossible to describe just how different Donna and Tim are from each other; you'd have to see it to believe it. As reserved and contained as Donna is, Tim is the complete opposite. His energy appears boundless; he is in constant motion. Yet these two music lovers appear inseparable - from each other, from the students in the Orchestra, and from their unwavering commitment to this group.

After a few lessons, Donna and Tim spoke at length about what they felt was a lack of a youth orchestra catering to orchestral string instruments in the area. With no grant money and in fact no substantial funding, and Donna holding a full-time job, they set about the task of founding the Gold Coast Youth Orchestra. In short order, they found an attorney and other experts to help create the 501(c) organization, and the Orchestra was born in October 2010. Neither Donna nor Tim are the type to let any grass grow under their feet - they began rehearsals in early November, and by early December, held their first Christmas concert with slightly more than a dozen students. Wow. We're not sure how much you know about youth orchestras, but just try to imagine completing the reams of paperwork that come with such an endeavor, recruiting students, securing rehearsal space, choosing performance pieces, ensuring that the students get to rehearsals, and putting on a public performance, all within a month or so. This is an impressive feat.

Fast forward to today. Less than two years later, Donna and Tim are running a summer program for 36 students, in addition to the school-year based program. This is their first summer program, and their hope is to use this as the basis for a second orchestral group, one which will act as a feeder



Tim Byrns and Donna Richards, after a Saturday rehearsal

into the main group. The students range in age from sixth grade through college undergraduates.

"We keep in contact with all of our kids; we want them to always feel at home here." This is apparent during the rehearsal. If there is a more diverse group of students who get along this well anywhere else, we haven't seen them. Clearly, these kids feel that they have found a home: with the orchestra and with each other. After a three hour rehearsal - on a summer Saturday! - the kids seem reluctant to leave.

Even the students who have gone off to college seem reluctant to leave. They are invited to come back and mentor the younger students, and several perform with the Orchestra while on college break. Clearly they have all found a home.

The summer program meets twice during the week, in the evening, and on Saturdays. "I have a full-time job," Donna noted, "like many parents. We chose to hold rehearsals after-hours so that working parents can manage to get their kids here without being stressed out." During the school year, rehearsals are held on Saturdays, so that the students can concentrate on their studies during the week. "We are very family-friendly," said Donna.

The challenge now, of course, is funding. As the GCYO is less than two years old, it's difficult to obtain the "sustaining grant" funding level that is needed. While students pay tuition, any youngster with talent, commitment and desire is accepted - no one who is qualified is turned away. This is a Herculean task. What, we asked, do Tim and Donna want the community to know about the Orchestra? "That we're here. And that we need the community's support - not just financial support, but support in general. Come to our performances. Learn about what we are doing, and get the word out." Interestingly, we posed this question separately to Tim and Donna and their responses were nearly identical. Again, these two dedicated people are about as sympathetic as it's possible to be.

Both Donna and Tim grew up playing music. Their love for this, and for the students, is evident. Pompano is fortunate to have such dedication to the arts in our community. 🌂

For photos of the students in rehearsal, please turn to page 44 of this issue.

Our interview with Donna and Tim continues online.

Visit www.pompanotoday.com for more; to learn more about the Gold Coast Youth Orchestra, visit <http://www.gcyo-fl.org>.

THE GOLD COAST YOUTH ORCHESTRA: HARD AT WORK THIS SUMMER



See story, Page 38. Clockwise from top left: two of the students are still deeply engaged in the rehearsal, even after three hours. In the background, two dedicated parents await; the students seem to have an endless ability to concentrate; throughout the rehearsal, Tim is moving from student to student, adjusting posture here or an instrument there. His patience appears endless.



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