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R-JENERATION: Music to the Ears

Las Vegas Academy guitar teacher strikes chord with students

By KIM DEGUZMAN
R-JENERATION

On CJ Sandy's MySpace page, under his "Heroes" section, sits only one name.

It's not that of his mom, dad, brother, sister, best friend or dog.

No, the name belongs to Bill Swick, his Las Vegas Academy guitar instructor.

"I couldn't have learned guitar from any other teacher," says Sandy, who recently graduated from the academy's guitar program.

In 2002, Swick started the guitar program at LVA, which began with 25 guitar majors.

"I was drawn to the school from the first moment I ever heard about it," Swick explains, noting that this was the first program of this nature that he started in the school district.

Today, there are 86 guitar majors who study guitar for 86 minutes every school day in LVA's Grammy award-winning program.

"Being at LVA is a valuable experience for me, especially learning from Mr. Swick," says Andrew Silva, a senior in the course. "I love playing guitar there. We get so many chances to perform and do what we love."

Swick started playing when he was 12 and has been in love with the guitar ever since. After completing high school, he attended the University of North Texas and graduated with a bachelor's degree in music and a master's in music education.

He then taught guitar at Drake University in Des Moines, Iowa, before moving to Las Vegas to teach at UNLV in 1982.

Six years later, Swick decided to switch to the K-12 school system. During his first four years there, he set the record for the greatest number of high school guitar students to qualify for Nevada all-state honors.

To this day, he still holds that mark.

"Each year, there's always a certain number of goals I set for the guitar students and the program," Swick says.

These goals include having four guitar concerts and two guitar recitals, numerous performances in the community, recording a CD and being accepted into a national guitar performance (such as the Loyola Marymount and NAMM Guitar Festivals) and a national guitar festival.

"Each year I've been at LVA, we've been able to achieve all of those goals," Swick notes.

In addition, LVA was the first high school guitar course in the country to receive the Gibson Award from the Grammy foundation in honor of the program.

"I think that's my greatest accomplishment to date," Swick says. "It's kind of unique."

Since the beginning of the guitar program at LVA, five of Swick's students have gone to attend Boston's prestigious Berklee School of Music.

Academy students also performed at the 2007 Guitar Foundation of America convention in Los Angeles and the 2006 Music Educators National Conference in Salt Lake City.

"My favorite part of teaching at LVA is watching each individual student make his or her progress," Swick says. "My goal is also to be able to prepare them for college or to prepare to have the guitar as a lesson in their lives."

Swick also owns and operates The Paperless Publisher, which is a music publishing company featuring his classroom guitar supplements. He's the creator of the Swickster Fingerboard System, which he believes to be "an innovative way to teach jazz improvisation."

"I just love the guitar," he says matter-of-factly. "I can't explain why. I just do."

Music to the Ears

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