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Lifestyle

For the love of music

By Catherine Laughlin / Correspondent

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Kristi Digman stood before the podium smiling. She had just finished leading 11 of her middle school music students from the King's Christian School's jazz band in a rendition of "Rock This Town."

The music director said that she has seen many evidences of God's blessings in her five years at the Cherry Hill school, but today's fortuitous gifts might be because God likes music, too. "Music is a gift for us to be enjoyed," said Digman.

Nearly 300 students, teachers and family members seated in padded chairs in the all-purpose room on this early spring morning applauded, showing their appreciation to the three men, who had come this day bearing gifts -- a donation of new musical instruments: a trumpet, clarinet, trombone, and two flutes, cases included.

King's Christian, with kids from pre-K through grade 12, became the second school to receive instruments from the Play 4 Me Foundation, a nonprofit founded by Grammy-nominated songwriter Joe Jefferson, along with his two Play 4 Me partners, Sam Jackson and physician Robert Grife.

When Jefferson first approached King's Christian principal John Walsh on a tip from a former student, who had passed the word that the school's music department was cash starved, Walsh thought to himself, what's the catch?

“We were bowled over by the whole thing ... someone offering brand new free instruments,” said Walsh. “We are very grateful to Mr. Jefferson. But because we are Christian believers, we don’t usually think things like this just happen by chance.”

Over brunch in 2010, Jefferson told longtime friend Jackson that he wanted to start donating instruments to needy schools throughout South Jersey, as a way to give back for the blessings he’s received in his own life.

Throughout a successful career that had spanned from 1972 to 1980, Jefferson, 67, had composed more than 400 songs that have been recorded by major artists including Eric Clapton, Elton John, Johnny Mathis, Gladys Knight, the O’Jays and The Spinners. These days, he works as a music producer through his Mount Laurel-based company, JBJ Entertainment.

A resident of Mount Laurel, Jefferson said while songwriting was his moneymaker as an adult, drums were his passion as a kid. “I saw how playing music enriched my own life growing up,” he said.

While Jefferson had altruistic aspirations, his longtime friend Jackson volunteered common sense. “I told Joe that this was going to cost a lot of money. But Joe said, ‘I know ... but I think we can get it,’” recalled Jackson, 66, who considers himself the operations manager of the nonprofit.

To raise funds, the trio have turned to the South Jersey community, raising more than \$10,000 from businesses and private donors in the last year. “It’s strange how situations seem to work out. Once I put the idea into the universe, it manifested,” said Jefferson.

Music has always been a part of his heart and soul, said Virtua Voorhees physician Grife, and the treasurer of Play 4 Me. He also told the assembly that college music majors are among some of the top candidates accepted into medical schools.

“As a father of six, I see the need for music. It is what makes other pursuits worth following,” he said. But, Grife also noted that it’s the first to go during tough economic times.

In January 2012, Palmyra High School became the first beneficiary of the Play 4 Me Foundation receiving a trombone, two clarinets, two flutes, two trumpets, and three saxophones.

“The instruments probably cost in the thousands.

But even more so, the ability for our students to now have music opportunities is priceless,” said former Palmyra High School principal Mark Pease, who is now the principal of Palmyra’s Charles Street School.

King’s Christian senior Ashli Cooper said she has loved being in the jazz and concert bands. She’s particularly grateful for the new trumpet, since the one that she’s been using has pieces falling off.

“This is great for the kids in the bands,” said Cooper. “I’m very excited that the future members will be able to use new instruments.”