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Sarah Smongeski, executive director, Pakachoag Music School of Greater Worcester, Auburn

The Pakachoag Music School of Greater Worcester, located in Auburn, was first established under the umbrella of the Pakachoag Church in 1982. By 1989, it evolved into the independent corporation it is today. Twenty-four faculty members instruct approximately 250 students of all ages per week in music theory, private and group lessons, large and small ensembles, musical theater, performance and more. Sarah Smongeski, the school's third director, received her degree in music education from Eastern Nazarene College and did graduate work in administration/management at the Harvard Extension School. A flute player and teacher, she has been at the school's helm for nearly 23 years.

What is your school's connection to Worcester Youth Orchestra and Chorus?

"We're best defined as partners in music. What we discovered is that each of our organizations has different needs, and we began talking about how we might support each other. So a relationship is evolving. We have a few students who are participating in the groups and we've shared space for classes and ensembles here at the school. We're exploring concertizing together. The students benefit from being part of a larger music learning community. And we're working on cross-pollination. Internally, we're looking at whether we can be of assistance to each other in terms of organizational efficiency - marketing is a natural first place to consider. It's an ongoing conversation. I like to dream about all possibilities. Wouldn't it be nice to have a community school for the performing arts, committed to performance at all levels, housed under one roof?"

Would you describe the All Saints Afternoon Tunes program and the ways the school reaches out to that neighborhood?

"That's an outreach program that's sponsored by All Saints Church (in Worcester). It was founded by a Pakachoag Music School alum who was also a church member. We've been involved as a lead partner. The program introduces music to families who have limited opportunities to access private music lessons - inner-city youth, children and elders. Afternoon Tunes is different in that it's very much about youth and community, because students of high school age teach elementary and middle school students with a Pakachoag faculty member providing guidance. So it's about music, but also youth empowerment and cross connections. It's neighborhood-oriented and we hope to do more with regard to additional outreach for underserved families."



Pakachoag Music School of Greater Worcester executive director Sarah Smongeski. T&G STAFF/CHRISTINE PETERSON

How often and where do your students perform for the public?

"We host more than 25 different programs each school year and nearly 100 percent are free and open to the public. Most happen here in the Pakachoag Church Great Hall (in Auburn). We also go out into the community. This year, students performed at All Saints Church prior to a faculty recital, in Wesley (United Methodist) Church (in Worcester) as part of First Night and we had fiddlers play at a town fair or two. We've also presented concerts at Mechanics Hall, the Worcester Art Museum, at local libraries and a few nursing homes. We'd like to do more. So that's on the list of goals for the future."

With all the technology and gadgets kids have today, how do you keep them interested in music?

"Keeping them interested is a long-term proposition. We encourage families to play and listen to music at home, go to live concerts and make it part of their family life. We want them to use technology to enhance and not replace music-making. The Music Together national lab school is implementing technology rapidly in terms of how they make the program available to families. The new online Music Zone is something families can access by becoming a Music Together family at Pakachoag. And, as teachers, we're beginning to use technology more in lessons and a little in performances. As enticing as gadgets are, I think kids are more enticed when they experience the unique sense of accomplishment that comes from being able to play an instrument well or sing nicely - especially when there's a captive audience. Technology can be fun in the moment, but it doesn't compare to the personal sense of accomplishment and community-based sharing that happens as part of a community school. I think the arts trump the gadgets."

Have popular shows like "American Idol," "The Voice," and "America's Got Talent" had an impact on your students' expectations for themselves?

"Yes, a lot of young children, especially ones taking voice lessons, come in with dreams. They want to be the next idol. Who knows? They might be. We support their dreams. But we let them know it is going to take work. Our message is that it takes time and there are long-honored traditions which have proven results for how to best learn an instrument or develop a voice. Our commitment and investment as a school is not for overnight success, but for long-term, lifelong engagement with music and the arts."

Do you have any success stories about alumni who have gone on to have great careers in music?

"All of our alum are success stories. There's a few I can think of. Lauren Rose King, originally from Whitinsville, is carving out a very successful career in opera and musical theater. She's sung at Carnegie Hall, recorded with Center Contemporary Opera and toured with Boston Baroque. She recently won a national audition for an upcoming summer fellowship. Andrew Thebeau, a pianist from Shrewsbury, released his first album, "Tourist Attraction," which is primarily rhythm and blues style, and is going to Los Angeles this summer to pursue film scoring. An organist, Gerry Senechal, originally from Auburn, has several CDs and heads up a large church music program down South. There are others. Several Worcester-area musicians are alums of the school — Beth Gondek and Jane Shivick. Some alum have gone on to study at Yale and Eastman and teach and play professionally."

Compiled by correspondent Susan Gonsalves