

Press Clippings 04/09/20

---The Courier-News---04/09/2020

Striking chords as outlet for students

Elgin teacher making house calls to repair broken instruments

By: Rafael Guerrero



Elgin orchestra teacher Jennifer Brown-James replaces a broken string on a student's instrument. (Jennifer Brown-James)

When a student breaks a string on their violin, viola, cello or bass in class, orchestra teacher Jennifer Brown-James replaces it right away so they can keep practicing and playing.

So, what to do when a student breaks a string while playing at home during the coronavirus outbreak? Make a house call, the longtime School District U-46 teacher said.

Not wanting to endanger her health or that of the student and his family, she keeps her distance and wears latex gloves while working on the instrument, Brown-James said.

Brown-James lives in Elgin, about 10 minutes away from the five Elgin schools at which she teaches: Harriet Gifford, Lowrie, Otter Creek and Washington elementary schools and Abbott Middle School.

Since her first house call shortly after schools closed, she's since done the same for three more of her 200-plus students and she has a few more scheduled for the coming week, Brown-James said. She has more than enough strings to help as many students as need it.

"I was just trying to get kids to keep playing," she said. "Right now, I think they need playing (an instrument) as an outlet."

Plus, she added, "it's good to see the students, even if from a distance."

Her help was a godsend for parent Heather Reinheimer, who shared her experience with school district administrators last week after Brown-James came to her home to replace a broken D-string on her son's viola.

"She righted his world where I could not," said Reinheimer, whose son is a seventh-grader at Abbott Middle School.

"His music calms him, he gets lost in it," she said.

Brown-James said she knows how "therapeutic" music can be, and she believes it can play an important role for her students during stressful times. Plus, it doesn't take a lot of effort on her part, she said.

"I've been doing this for 25 years. I can tune instruments and replace strings very quickly," she said. "A lot of (the kids) need something to calm them down. ... And they have the time right now to practice."

Some students weren't able to pick up their instruments before the schools were shut down in March to slow the coronavirus spread, Brown-James said. For those she's trying to find alternate assignments or recording herself doing a lesson they can watch on their computers.

She also plans to check in with her students through weekly video sessions and hopes she might be able to set up video-conferencing sessions, she said.

"I'm not great with computers ... but I'm learning quickly," Brown-James said. "And the students have been very helpful."

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