

Circle is unbroken for Sisters music teacher

By Jodi Schneider McNamee
Correspondent

A decade ago, Benji Nagel was a student learning to play music through Sisters Folk Festival’s Ameicana Project. Now the student has become the teacher, providing guitar instruction for students K-7 at Black Butte School (BBS) in Camp Sherman.

It’s a complete, unbroken circle of music in Sisters Country.

“I instruct all of the kids in Black Butte School Tuesday and Thursday afternoons,” Nagel said. “I rotate my classes for the 17 students, K through 8th grade. It’s usually about six kids per class, and I have all of them within a two-hour period.

“For the youngest group I take a totally different approach. I do more games with them, because the guitar is just physically too big for them at this point.”

Nagel’s eagerness to play music began with a guitar when he was 12 years old. He got his start as student in the Americana Project, Sisters Folk Festival’s music outreach program, and graduated from Sisters High School in 2006

“My favorite thing about SHS was the Americana Project. I was involved as a freshman and recorded a few songs on their CD,” Nagel said.

After graduation, Nagel moved on to Portland State University for an undergraduate degree in music for two years in the jazz guitar program.

“I decided that I didn’t really want to stay with the



Benji Nagel is teaching guitar at Black Butte School.

PHOTO BY JODI SCHNEIDER MCNAMEE

academic music path,” Nagel explained. “I had other interests. So I changed majors and transferred to SOU and became an environmental studies major. I became interested in environmental issues, gardening and organic farming.”

Nagel’s been teaching guitar class at BBS for about a month. And for the past three years he has taught ukulele classes at an elementary school in Bend.

“I enjoy the challenges of teaching guitar to all ages,” Nagel said, smiling. “I can tell which kids are more interested in learning the guitar. It’s more about the willingness or desire to learn.”

Nagel explained to *The Nugget* why he applied for the teaching position at BBS.

“Ethan Barrons, a full-time teacher at BBS, sells

pasta at Sisters Farmers Market, and last summer I was selling vegetables. We became friends and he let me know that BBS was looking for somebody to teach guitar.”

The historic Black Butte School has operated in Camp Sherman for 100 years. The school moved around a bit, but the present-day two-room schoolhouse, dedicated in 1950, is the home to students K-8 who are educated in mixed-aged classrooms that allow for plenty of individualized educational opportunities. Delany Sharp is the principal at BBS.

“This is my first year here, and I am the head teacher,” Delany said. “We’re so small that Ethan and I are the only full-time teachers here, and I basically do a lot of the administrative work and

teach multiple classes. We are happy to have Benji Nagel teaching guitar, and we also have Annie Painter as our part-time art instructor.”

Nagel’s full-time job is organic farming at Mahonia Gardens on the Tehan family’s property in Sisters. The local organic farm is operated by Nagel and his wife, Carys Wilkens.

“This will be Carys and my fourth season growing crops, and right next to our plot is Audrey Tehan’s seed-to-table project,” Benji said.

When Nagel’s not teaching or farming you can find him performing with his music partner and friend Raman Ellis.

“I’ve done some recordings with Raman and we play a lot together. He recorded a CD, ‘We Are The Light,’” Nagel said.

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