

SFF programs shape lives in Sisters

By Ceili Cornelius
Correspondent

“Thanks to Sisters Folk Festival and the Americana Project I am an artist and a songwriter — but also a person of passion and purpose,” said SHS alum and artist, Laura Curtis.

That is the impact the Sisters Folk Festival (SFF) has created for more than 25 years of its presence in the community, through influential and innovative programs, particularly within the Sisters schools.

One of the most influential creations in the schools has been the Americana Project, an innovative music and arts education program with broad community outreach. The Americana Project works in collaboration with the Sisters School District to make the program available to all students of all ages.

The program started in 2000 when Brad Tisdel, now creative director of SFF, who was working as an independent contractor with Creative Education Resources, LLC, collaborated with SFF and the Sisters School District to create and develop the program, bringing creativity into school environments. SFF board members Kathy Deggendorfer and Dick Sandvik wanted to create a program for the Sisters youth that ensconced them in music and culture in the school environment, connected to the Sisters Folk Festival.

That became the Americana Project.

Sandvik explained, “We wanted to somehow connect the community to the festival and we figured out that the way to do that was through education.”

“We decided we wanted to focus on the youth and get them interested in

songwriting and teach that folk music can be contemporary,” said Deggendorfer.

They worked with the schools superintendent at the time, Steve Swisher, to implement the curriculum in the Sisters schools.

“Swisher was instrumental in allowing outside groups to come in and teach about folk music and songwriting and now it is taught in K-12,” Deggendorfer said.

“One of the most influential things I’ve seen from it was a video testimonial from a student that said he would’ve dropped out of school if it hadn’t been for the Americana class,” said Sandvik.

The festival hired Brad Tisdel to teach the class alongside Dennis McGregor who first taught guitar lessons. They both worked alongside Jody Henderson, the band instructor at the time, who came up with the curriculum and implemented it directly into the classroom.

Sisters High School choir director and performer Rick Johnson — a singer-songwriter himself — now teaches the Americana Project class.

“The Americana Project and the Folk Festival was a perfect combo to allow us to be innovative and creative in how the school and the arts and the community can come together in a powerful way,” said Tisdel.

The Americana Project attracted grant and foundation money to support the programs and the festival over the years.

“It was a really great synergy linking the education with culture in the community,” said Sandvik.

The Americana Project over the years has also created a song camp and a song academy for youth. Tisdel had seen the success of offering a master class outside of the



PHOTO BY JAY MATHER

The program serves as an umbrella of being engaged and to provide a home there for students.”

— Brad Tisdel

school environment through his experience working with the Rocky Mountain Folk Festival’s Song School. In 2002, the team created the Americana Song Academy. The song academy became a series of master classes for all ages, with classes taught by musicians from the community and artists coming for the Sisters Folk Festival.

In 2004, Tisdel saw the need for a camp that was specifically for the youth — a way to come together and share music outside of the school.

“It was really based on being able to come together and collaborate and not compete, but support one another,” said Tisdel. “It has also been beneficial to have the schools have a deep connection with a community nonprofit over the years. It is a really efficient way to access the musical community that has been curated in Sisters.”

The Americana Project has been a powerful influence on a number of young musicians who are still pursuing music as a career. Madison Slicker, now known by her artist name Amava says:

“I was a part of the Americana Project and Sisters Folk Festival from fifth grade up until my senior year... Being 23 now, living in Nashville, Tennessee, and still in the music industry, I truthfully cannot imagine where I would be now had it not been for the importance of music in the Sisters community. I definitely would not have pursued music and felt the passion I have for staying in

the songwriting world.”

There are many ways to be involved in the Americana Project that are not just focused on singer-songwriter performance.

“Students can be involved in the tech aspect or create art for My Own Two Hands (the festival’s major fundraiser) and the program serves as an umbrella of being engaged and to

provide a home there for students,” said Tisdel.

The Sisters Folk Festival strives year-round to bring connection to the arts and music in the schools and beyond. This year, the festival is especially trying to keep that message alive as people cannot gather together due to the coronavirus pandemic. As stated by their website: “SFF enriches lives through innovative music and arts education, programming and events that serve an inclusive, multi-generational community.”



PHOTO BY JAY MATHER

We miss the crowds and the music too, Sisters!

Join the festival online and show your support for the Sisters Folk Festival. Visit the saloon to show your support for Sisters’ businesses. We appreciate our community and look forward to having our stages filled once again!

DINE-IN OR TAKE-OUT: 541-549-7427
Full Menu Available At SistersSaloon.net • 190 E. Cascade Ave.