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Lissa Brewer
lbrewer@dailyastorian.com

WEEKEND BREAK



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They sing, they dance

Astoria music teacher creates solution to showcase learning

By PATRICK WEBB
For The Astorian

Vincent Centeno's problem required a creative solution.

His Astoria third, fourth and fifth grade students were making splendid music, but COVID precautions meant their families couldn't go to Lewis and Clark Elementary School to hear it.

So the music teacher grabbed a video camera and created a website where he posts their musical performances.

There, he has posted videos for each of the classes. As well as music, kids are shown performing traditional square dancing.

"I teach them everything I can about music," said Centeno, who is in his fourth year teaching at Lewis and Clark. "Listening to music, performing music, improvising music. And they are expected to perform in the end."

A pre-pandemic syllabus for the higher elementary grades involved inviting an in-person audience to attend winter and spring public programs, but times have changed.

"Because of COVID, we cannot allow strangers or families to come into the building," he said. "We cannot turn the cafeteria into an auditorium, so I had to think of a way that parents can see what's happening in music classes. So every time they completed a piece of music or completed a project I videotaped it."

It began last fall with audio recordings of students performing a welcome-back song.

Once parental permission slips were returned for kids' images to be featured online, Centeno switched to video. The website includes photographs of his students in colorful costumes they wore to dance.

Some videos feature students singing the old French song "Frère Jacques," which introduced the age-old concept of singing "in the round" with overlapping voices. Before the winter holiday break, students learned and performed "Deck The Halls" and "Jingle Bells," as well as a Hanukkah song and "Feliz Navidad."

While mindful of social distancing protocols, students made unannounced caroling visits to hallways outside other classrooms and serenaded staff in offices. "It was very well received," he said. "After Christmas break, they were asking me if they were going to keep doing caroling."

One of the more visual activities in the videos is square dancing. Centeno obtained a recording from Ireland to stir interest. "It's a lost art," he said. Some boys weren't keen at the beginning, he laughed. "But in the end everybody wanted to dance," he said.

Learning goes beyond musical skills. Square dancing and singing in the round teach concentration, for example.

Centeno explained to students the European tradition where people reward doorstep carolers with money to donate to charity. "When the kids learned about it they made paper 'money' and handed it to the other kids," he said.

Principal Nicole Smith has enjoyed the socially distanced singing and other musical activities.

She noted how Centeno's creative thinking in posting images online "allowed families a window into what students are working on in music class."

"We are so fortunate to have Vincent Centeno as our music teacher — and he continues to find ways to remove barriers so students can showcase what they are learning in music. His units include interactive and engaging activities," she said.

Centeno was born in the Philippines and his family emigrated to Chicago when he was 9. There he attended



Lewis and Clark Elementary School fourth grader Sylvia Blackburn, left, and fifth grader Sammael Barbosa work with music teacher Vincent Centeno. The students are learning the ukulele after spending much of last fall singing and learning square dancing.



Lewis and Clark Elementary School fourth graders Hudson Allen, Paul Schacher and Hunter Green were among students enjoying music and dance instruction.



For Lewis and Clark Elementary School third graders Emily Miles, left, and Andrea Sherman, square dancing was an opportunity to dress up in their old-fashioned finery and have some fun.

DePaul University before moving West. He then earned a master's degree in teaching at Pacific University, followed by a doctorate in music at the University of Oregon. He moved to Astoria in 2016.

He is a private piano teacher through the Astoria Conservatory of Music and serves as music director and organist at Grace Episcopal Church in Astoria. He also is music director of the Cascadia Chamber Opera.

His enthusiasm for teaching his elementary school students is evident in his voice, heard giving encouragement as well as direction on the video recordings.

Now into the second half of the school year, Centeno is teaching his students to play the ukulele, learning beginner's chords from YouTube tutorials. This effort likely will feature in his later videos.

"I am not aiming at perfection," Centeno said. "I want them to have fun. I want them to be exposed to different types of music."



Music teacher Vincent Centeno demonstrates to his students at Lewis and Clark Elementary School how to play the ukulele.

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Vincent Centeno | music teacher at Lewis and Clark Elementary School