

Hood River Mariachi

HRCSD students take part in longstanding tradition

By TRISHA WALKER
News staff writer

Head to Hood River Middle School on a Tuesday or Wednesday afternoon, and you'll find the music room buzzing with the sounds of mariachi.

Hood River Mariachi is a free afterschool program for students in kindergarten through 12th grade in the Hood River County School District, staged at HRMS. What started three years ago as part of a grant from Oregon Community Foundation has blossomed into a community-supported program that attracts students from all over the district, funded by the school district, Hood River Education Foundation, Arts in Education of the Gorge and Hood River Cultural Trust.

The program is taught by Hood River mariachi pioneer Juan Antonio Martinez, who has taught similar classes at St. Mary's Catholic Church for the past 30 years or so. Many students participating in the Hood River Mariachi group are also taking lessons at the church.

"I started in 1988, soon after I arrived here," said Martinez, who is an instructional assistant at HRMS. "That's why the district asked me to teach these classes. They saw me doing that at St. Mary's and asked, can I help at HRMS?"

The goal of the program, according to a press release, is to "expose students, the bi-cultural community of Hood River County School District, to a small piece of the diverse heritage in its cultural traditions. It is important to provide students with a way to participate in their story, to learn more about their cultural heritage through the art of mariachi music, by learning to play traditional instruments, learning traditional rhythms, melodies and performing as an ensemble."

"I'm so thankful to Mr. Martinez — none of this would be possible without Mr. Martinez,"

Video available

Watch a short video on Hood River Mariachi at vimeo.com/345132642?ref=em-share.

said HRMS Principal Brent Emmons. "He's been at the school 30 years. That's a long time ... You've got this man who has insane knowledge — he's an incredible musician, he knows so much and he's so committed."

Students practice at HRMS on Tuesdays and Wednesdays from 3:30-5:15 p.m. and come from all over the district. Right now, there are students from HRMS, Wy'east, May Street, Parkdale Elementary and Hood River Valley High. All students of any age are invited to participate; high school students are particularly needed.

Hood River Mariachi has performed for a number of local audiences, including the annual Music Festival of the Gorge, the May Street PTO Teddy Webber fundraiser and, most recently, the Hood River Education Foundation's annual Evening of Excellence gala in February.

"People are usually blown away when they see them perform — older kids, little kids, it's been really great," Emmons said.

"Mr. Martinez wants the kids to get out there and perform, so we're interested in having folks who want to have the band perform (contact us)," Emmons said. "They don't have to be musicians," he said, adding that singers and dancers are also needed — and if a student doesn't play an instrument but wants to, they are welcome to join too.

Mariachi brings something

positive to both the students performing and the audience watching, Emmons said.

"It honors a culture that is not as prominent in our community as it should be," Emmons said. "It really, truly engages the audience and you become part of the performance. That's pretty amazing. That's the power of art right there."

Kimberly Jaimes, a seventh grader from HRMS, plays the vihuela, having started on guitar under Martinez's tutelage. It was Martinez who suggested she try the

instrument and now, "I know more on the vihuela than guitar," she said. "I like learning different techniques — every song, we learn a different technique with different notes. It can be challenging, but learning new ones is always fun."

For Yadira Solis, a sixth grader from Wy'east, it's the trumpet that is her instrument of choice. "I thought it would be really fun and that I could make loud sounds on it," she

explained. She's been playing mariachi music for around three years, starting as a singer before taking up the trumpet.

HRVHS sophomore David Guzman and Wy'east eighth grader Jennifer Guzman —

brother and sister — play guitarron and violin, respectively; David also plays violin, guitar, vihuela, baritone, trombone, tuba and trumpet.

Learning mariachi is a good pursuit, David said, because "it helps you if you feel bored — you can play. If you're down, it will bring you up. And it helps you play whatever (instrument) you want because some of the notes are the same on the instruments."

"I got started with the basics — how to hold the violin, then I learned some songs," said Jennifer. "I practice a lot at home."

"I really enjoy playing it and



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Photos courtesy of Brent Emmons, HRMS

THE MARIACHI BAND performs at various community events, such as this one, above, at Hood River County School District sites. Above, long-time mariachi teacher Juan Antonio Martinez.



DAVID GUZMAN on guitarron, Kimberly Jaimes on vihuela and teacher Juan Antonio Martinez on violin; new student Angel Arredondo watches.



Photos by Trisha Walker

KIMBERLY JAIMES plays the vihuela with teacher Juan Antonio Martinez during a February after-school practice at HRMS.