



Children in Reno's Kid Rocker program actually get the chance to perform the music they're learning to play.

COURTESY/KID ROCKER

Child's play

Kid Rocker

Learning how to play an instrument is hard. In school, music classes are inadequately prioritized, and overworked teachers often fail to foster positive relationships between their students and music. One time, for instance, my middle school band director was so frustrated with our 6th grade performance of the G scale that he punched the white board, leaving permanent dents and scaring the bejesus out of my classmates and me. Only a handful of students returned the following semester.

Price tag aside, kids don't usually fair much better in private lessons. If you took one, you might remember doing everything except practicing.

Sometimes, abstract and inaccessible—or involving a wall punch—music lessons can discourage a young person from playing an instrument. They also frequently deprive students of what is arguably the most exciting part: having the opportunity to play music you love in front of people. It's hard to motivate a hyperactive 5th grader to practice at all, nearly impossible if they aren't shown where playing music can take them.

Reno's Kid Rocker program doesn't think it has to be this way. They hope to support and expand Reno's community of young musicians by translating a love of music into tangible playing experience, regardless of income or circumstance.

"I found that if a kid can't play after a bit, they're going to quit," said Lucas Stephenson, the director of Kid Rocker and a teacher at EnCompass Academy High School. "It's no fun to learn how to play an instrument. It's fun to play it. So we combine the music and the stage. We show kids the full circle."

So far, the program has enrolled 20 students ranging in age from 7 to 18.

Instruments offered include ukulele, bass, six-string guitar and drums. Every few months Kid Rocker puts together a concert, usually at a local all-ages venue like the Holland Project, showcasing songs the students have been practicing. Interested Rockers have the opportunity to help with stage set-up and sound engineering at these shows, too—skills that Stephenson thinks are valuable if his students look to work in the music industry.

Starting Kid Rocker, though, Stephenson told me his ambition was not to reform music instruction. It was to increase the accessibility of one-on-one music lessons for low-income young people. He has a background in social work and wants to replicate through music the positive impact that consistent mentor-like relationships can have in at-risk young people's lives. Kid Rocker is a non-profit and recently launched a scholarship initiative dubbed "My Will to Win" to generate donations for the program. Only two students receive benefits right now, but Stephenson hopes to offer more than 50 young people year-around lessons by working with local outreach groups like The Eddy House—a resource center for homeless and at-risk youth—and Big Brothers Big Sisters, which partners young people with adult mentors in the community to help them succeed and grow.

"I believe in a huge way that we can protect and take care of our community by getting young people playing music," Stephenson said. "I think that when we give young people a platform to make something happen, they'll take advantage of it. We're just trying to do the most good we can." □

Information about upcoming showcase concerts and lessons can be found on Kid Rocker's Facebook page at facebook.com/groups/1082814505189923.

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