

Press Release

June 22, 2021

Contact: Chrissy Fowler

email: ktaadn_me@hotmail.com

Belfast Flying Shoes Shares the Joy of Ukulele with RSU 71 Students

Belfast Flying Shoes (BFS) is best known as the organization behind the popular First Friday Community Dance and Contra Dance, in Belfast. But the nonprofit, now in its sixteenth year, has long sponsored a variety of other programs in support of its mission of “bolstering the spirited music and dance community in midcoast Maine,” including dance residencies at local schools, a dance and instrument lessons at the Maine Coastal Regional Reentry Center, pop-up outdoor concerts at the Tall Pines Retirement and Healthcare Community, and music workshops led by some of North America’s foremost contra dance bands.

And while in-person dances have been on hiatus since March of 2020, other BFS programs have thrived through the pandemic—modified as required for safety, of course—and the organization has also launched several new initiatives. Among the latter, the BFS board is especially excited about the Ukes in School program.

In the fall of 2020, BFS donated 248 brand-new soprano ukuleles to RSU 71 schools and began providing free ukulele lessons to students. Participating in the program were 4th- and 5th-graders at the Captain Albert Stevens School, in Belfast, and the Ames Elementary School, in Searsmont. At the Kermit S. Nickerson School, in Swanville, the program was open to 3rd, 4th, and 5th graders. Instructors Ando Anderson and Chrissy Fowler conducted both in-person and remote lessons, as appropriate, and coordinated with school music teachers to ensure that the ukes will play an ongoing role in their curricula.

Fowler, a BFS founder and the organization’s current executive director, says Ukes in School was a surprisingly positive consequence of the pandemic. “We were talking with music teachers about how to help in this unusual year,” she says. “We decided that the ukulele was a good fit because it’s a really accessible instrument, and also very much a community-participation instrument. There are so many ukulele groups and clubs out there.” The uke’s compact size also makes it perfect for small hands, and—unlike many band instruments—students can play it while safely masked and socially distanced. While the use of wind instruments was limited by safety protocols, the ukes kept students and teachers connected to the joy of group music-making.

Justin Bari, music teacher at the Captain Albert Stevens School and the Nickerson School, says that while the program came in response to an immediate challenge, “I believe the opportunity to try a stringed instrument has been long overdue. I’ve had some students who have rarely responded to activities we have done in class, but when that ukulele was in their hands, they found an extension of themselves. Ukulele is easier to hold and to create chords [on] than a guitar. Also, there is a lot of popular music that embraces its use.” All of those benefits have the potential to outlive the pandemic.

Music teacher Amy Gardner’s students took to the four-string instruments with enthusiasm. “They composed pentatonic melodies, played chords, and learned a varied repertoire of folk and contemporary music,” she says. One of her Ames School students said, “It was not that hard to learn, but it was very different from an instrument blowing air. I like how you can make cool sounds, and learning songs was easy.”

Students learning from home via computer felt the magic too, says teacher Susan Flory, whose fourth-grade students dubbed their virtual cohort “Remoterville.” “The Remoterville students got great benefit from the experience,” Flory says. “Even those who didn’t love the uke all tried, and we all laughed together. It was something that enriched these kids’ odd year of education.”

Photo credit: Tracy Haslip/RSU #71

