

Hands-on training is one of the many traditions at Litchfield Jazz Camp.



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LITCHFIELD FOSTERS 'LIFETIME CONNECTIONS'

WHEN SHE STARTED THE LITCHFIELD JAZZ Camp in rural Connecticut in 1997, former science journalist Vita Muir had the goal of providing attendees with everything she knew music could give them. She wanted to open the world of improvised music to campers who couldn't otherwise afford a summer getaway and to those whose learning difficulties shut them out of traditional pathways to success.

Today, when she reflects on the thousands of campers who have participated in the month-long/four-session program over its 20 seasons, Muir sees an unqualified success.

"I take kids who are different, and they thrive in this environment," she said. "It's like magic."

The program accepts up to 400 residential and day campers, ranging from age 12 to adult, each year. Now staged on the campus of the Canterbury School in New Milford, the camp provides a mix of combo practice, theoretical and compositional workshops, and master classes with artists like bassist Mario Pavone and drummers George Schuller and Matt Wilson. Like non-musical summer camps, there are also recreational activities, including running, swimming, soccer and an early-morning fitness class. Students participate in regular jam sessions, perform at a session-ending concert and are invited to perform at a concert at the Litchfield Jazz Festival, which Muir created in 1996.

She began presenting music in the area in 1981, co-founding the non-profit Litchfield Performing Arts foundation to showcase classical artists.

"I was always interested in the educational

side," she said, "and we took a classical trio into the schools for a few years."

Then, in the spring of 1996, she hired trombonist Steve Davis' band to work with a group of 35 students.

"That's still the model for the camp," she said, "but unfortunately Steve wasn't available when it came time to launch the first camp. Luckily, I found Don Braden playing in New Orleans with Art Farmer, and Don's been with us as music director ever since."

Utilizing a combination of state grants and fundraising, the foundation provides about \$104,000 in aid to students who can't afford the weekly tuition of \$975 for day campers or \$1,385 for resident participants.

"I wanted to find students who probably wouldn't have a chance to be exposed to this music and the kinds of teachers we have here," said Muir.

One of those campers was saxophonist Albert Rivera, who is now an acclaimed recording/touring artist and serves as the camp's director of operations.

"Albert was 15 and very poor," she said. "He worked his way up through the ranks, and he's an amazing example of what people can accomplish if you give them the opportunity."

"Our mission is to spread joy through music and let students know that if you work hard, be kind and learn to have a good business sense, you can live your dreams," said Rivera, who has worked with Winard Harper, Sheila Jordan, René Marie and Jay Clayton.

One of the things that Muir emphasizes through the camp is continuing education.

"We have a college night each session, to

expose the high school-aged students to post-secondary recruiters. We try to steer the colleges to our most-promising campers, and we teach the campers how to get scholarships. These days, it's a patchwork quilt in the music business, and we really stress the importance of getting that piece of paper from a college. We tell them, 'Look, you're not going to be the next Wynton Marsalis; you need to put a number of things together to make a living in music.'"

Applying her science background, Muir is a stickler for collecting data on her former campers, and her ongoing surveys indicate that about half of them pursue degrees in music. About 60 percent win scholarships, and many have gone on to do well in music competitions.

"The camp is great at continuing the student/mentorship ideology years after students have come and gone to the camp," said Rivera. "Whether it's getting them on the guest list for their first experience at the Village Vanguard, personally introducing them to musicians they've always wanted to meet, or sharing the stage with them, we continue the tradition of hands-on training, regardless of whether it's the summertime or not."

Looking back over his years at the camp—as camper, student leader and faculty member—Rivera said: "I see the connections created. Strong connections. I think one of the biggest keys to our success, and the success of our campers, is the friendships and lifetime connections that are possible to create here."

"That's what music, in the right environment, can do," said Muir. —James Hale