



“Piano Lessons” for Life

TRUE STORY by Mildred Hondorf

I am a former elementary school music teacher from DeMoines, Iowa. I’ve always supplemented my income by teaching piano lessons – something I’ve done for over 30 years. Over the years I found that children have many levels of musical ability.

I’ve never had the pleasure of having a protege, though I have taught some talented students. However, I’ve also had my share of what I call “musically challenged” pupils. One such student was Robby. Robby was 11 years old when his mother (a single mom) dropped him off for his first piano lesson.

I prefer that students (especially boys) begin at an earlier age, which I explained to Robby. But, Robby said that it had always been his mother’s dream to hear him play the piano. So I took him as a student. Well, Robby began with his piano lessons and, from the beginning, I thought it was a hopeless endeavor.

As much as Robby tried, he lacked the sense of tone and basic rhythm needed to excel. But, he dutifully reviewed his scales and some elementary pieces that I require all my students to learn. Over the months he tried and tried while I listened and cringed and tried to encourage him. At the end of each weekly lesson he’d always say, “My mom’s going to hear me play someday.” But, it seemed hopeless. He just did not have any inborn ability.

I only knew his mother from a distance as she dropped Robby off or waited in her aged car to pick him up. She always waved and smiled but never stopped in. Then one day Robby stopped coming to our lessons. I thought about calling him, but assumed, because of his lack of ability, that he had decided to pursue something else. I also was glad that he stopped coming. He was a bad advertisement for my teaching!

Several weeks later I mailed to the student’s homes a flyer on the upcoming recital. To my surprise Robby (who received a flyer) asked me if he could be in the recital. I told him that the recital was for current pupils and because he had dropped out he really did not qualify. He said that his mom had been sick and unable to take him to piano lessons, but he was still practicing.

“Miss Hondorf... I’ve just got to play!” he insisted. I don’t know what led me to allow him to play in the recital. Maybe it was his persistence or maybe it was something inside of me saying that it would be all right.

The night for the recital came. The high school gymnasium was packed with parents, friends and relatives. I put Robby up last in the program before I was to come up and thank all the students and play a finishing piece. I thought that any damage he would do would come at the end of the program and I could always salvage his poor performance through my “curtain closer.”

Well, the recital went off without a hitch. The students had been practicing and it showed. Then Robby came up on stage. His clothes were wrinkled and his hair looked like he had run an eggbeater through it. “Why didn’t he dress up like the other students?” I thought. “Why didn’t his mother at least make him comb his hair for this special night?”

Robby pulled out the piano bench and he began. I was surprised when he announced that he had chosen Mozart’s Concerto #21 in C Major. I was not prepared for what I heard next. His fingers were light on the keys, they even danced nimbly on the ivories. He went from pianissimo to fortissimo... from allegro to virtuoso. His suspended chords that Mozart demands were magnificent! Never had I heard Mozart played so well by people his age.

After six and a half minutes he ended in a grand crescendo and everyone was on their feet in wild applause. Overcome and in tears I ran up on stage and put my arms around Robby in joy. “I’ve never heard you play like that Robby! How’d you do it?”

Through the microphone Robby explained: “Well, Miss Hondorf... remember I told you my mom was sick? Well, actually she had cancer and passed away this morning. And well... she was born deaf, so tonight was the first time she ever heard me play. I wanted to make it special.”

There wasn’t a dry eye in the house that evening. As the people from Social Services led Robby from the stage to be placed into foster care, I noticed that even their eyes were red and puffy and I thought to myself how much richer my life had been for taking Robby as my pupil. No, I’ve never had a prodigy, but that night I became a protege... of Robby’s. He was the teacher and I was the pupil. For it is he that taught me the meaning of perseverance and love and believing in yourself and maybe even taking a chance in someone and you don’t know why.

This is especially meaningful to me since, after serving in Desert Storm, Robby was killed in the senseless bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City in April of 1995, where he was reportedly... playing the piano.