

The Washington Post

Rain, snow 45/23 • Tomorrow: Partly sunny 33/24 DETAILS, B3

TUESDAY, JANUARY 12, 2016

washingtonpost.com



2013 PHOTO FROM THE VIRGINIA MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS

Singing the praises of a songwriting program

BY SARAH POLUS

When Wynnie Thompson was in elementary school, she played an instrument, but she had a passion to write music and perform it. What she didn't have was the confidence to do it.

"When you get a bad haircut and don't want to go to school — it's kind of like that," Wynnie said.

That changed when she and classmates at Rappahannock County Elementary School went through Kid Pan Alley, a music education program that turns kids into songwriters. In the program, students learn about music and write songs, some of which professional musicians such as Amy Grant later record.

Paul Reisler, who founded the program, and the Kid Pan Alley team have written more than 2,500 songs with about 35,000 kids in the past 15 years and visit 20 to 25 schools around the country each year. Kids in Washington participated last month.

"I had an interest before [in songwriting], but Kid Pan Alley definitely showed me how to let your brain flow," said Wynnie, who's 14 and lives in Sperryville, Virginia. She now writes songs every day.

Writing as a group helps students bond as they work toward a goal. "It's something you can express yourself through without feeling like you're going to be judged for it," Wynnie said.

Some kids are initially embarrassed by the idea of singing or speaking their emotions in front of their peers, but Wynnie said Kid Pan Alley brought her out of her shell and made her realize that there's nothing lame about songwriting.

"It's most definitely cool to play music and express yourself," she said.

Although writing a song sounds tricky, Reisler said his team has gotten the process down to a science. In fact, all the songs he writes with kids are done in less than two hours. "He was teaching this in a way that wasn't making us feel like babies," Wynnie said of Reisler's approach. "And it wasn't getting us too ahead of ourselves."

After the kids brainstorm about song ideas and then develop lines, the hard part comes: making the melody.

"If the line was 'I used to know the name of all the stars, now I just know a few planets like Mercury, Earth and Mars,' I'll have one of the kids speak that for me," Reisler said. "And we clap it in the rhythm of which they spoke it." He shows them



FAMILY PHOTO

TOP: Kid Pan Alley founder Paul Reisler, right, performs with students in Richmond. **ABOVE:** Wynnie Thompson has continued writing songs after participating in the program.

with his hands the pitch, or how high or low they were speaking the words.

"It's the natural pitch and rhythm of speech that we're trying to mimic," Reisler said.

He plays the line in a few musical styles on his guitar, and the kids pick which genre, or style, they think fits best.

The most important part of the process is getting kids to open up and feel comfortable embracing their inner musician, Reisler said.

"It's a creativity program dressed up in songwriter's clothes."

kidpost@washpost.com

IF YOU GO

What: Kid Pan Alley concert featuring kids from Moten, Turner and Savoy elementary schools.

Where: THEARC, 1901 Mississippi Avenue SE, Washington.

When: Wednesday at 4:30 p.m.

How much: Free.

For more information: A parent can call 540-322-2022 or email info@kidpanalley.org.