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FENWAY-KENMORE

## At the Boston Conservatory, autistic students learn from music lessons

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By Anna Westendorf, Globe Correspondent

The Boston Conservatory is renowned for its intensive training in the performing arts, but on Saturday mornings, this Fenway institution offers a unique program: providing music lessons to children and young adults with autism.

The Conservatory, a private performing arts college, united with the Autism Higher Education Foundation in 2007 to form the Boston Conservatory Program for Students on the Autism Spectrum.

This little-known program pairs each child with a single teacher, who also works with a consulting team that includes a music therapist, a speech pathologist, a special educator and professionals in the music industry who have an Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) diagnosis.

The program, which provides music lessons, rather than the more traditional music-based therapy, is the first of its kind, said Rhoda Bernard, director of the program. While most participants live within 45 miles of Boston, some families travel from the far corners of the state to attend.

Bernard said the program can be transformative for students who have trouble interacting with others and expressing themselves.

“We hope for our program to change the lives of our students and their families by making music an important part of their lives,” she said.

Autism is a developmental disorder that includes problems with communicating and interacting with other people.

“Finding pathways of communication that will help you and the student be on the same wavelength of understanding can sometimes be really difficult,” said Jill Hogan, program assistant and a Conservatory graduate. She said music “provides another area of communication that may be more accessible to those children.”

Gianna, 15, is one such student. She and her family relocated to Groton after years of unsuccessful attempts to find programs for Gianna in their former home state.

Lisa Hitsos, Gianna's mother, said the program has had a “profound impact” on her daughter. After one year, Gianna has uncovered her talent for singing, and that self-awareness and confidence has helped her to grow.

“Gianna transformed from a child constantly being left out and bullied, to a talented student that is full of life,” said Hitsos. “She is now excelling in school, is more social, has self esteem and pride.”

Hogan said the program allows students to make “a meaningful connection with another person -- their teacher -- who is willing to put aside their communication differences and to dig deep enough to find their voice.”

Some parents say finding someone to make that connection can be an arduous venture. Alice Taylor of Waltham, whose 24-year-old son, Evan, attends the program, noted that finding music therapists was easy -- but she had “despaired of finding a music teacher who could handle [Evan’s] autistic behaviors,” as the Conservatory has been able to do.

Hogan, a local Fenway resident, agrees.

“I think this program creates opportunities for members of our community who might have difficulty finding them elsewhere,” she said.

The program is also aiming to reach out to the larger community. Every September, training sessions for local teachers are held at the Conservatory, and the program is piloting an “on-the-road” teacher-training arm, traveling to schools throughout the state. Both workshops are designed to inform educators about best approaches to teaching music to students on the autism spectrum.

“Members of the community who are on the autism spectrum need to be recognized as people who are able,” said Hogan. “If such a large portion of the population is unrecognized or not given programs or opportunities to shine, that is a disservice.”

For her part, Hitsos sees great things ahead for Gianna.

“She wants to be an example to the world that a person with autism is capable of great things,” she said. “This is something that no other program has been able to achieve.”

This article was reported and written by Northeastern University journalism student Anna Westendorf, under the supervision of journalism instructor Lisa Chedekel, as part of collaboration between The Boston Globe and Northeastern.

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