

Good Works: Music lover brings lessons, instruments to metro teens

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Michael Connor reined in his dreams, but only for a little while, he hopes.

When he heard stories about public schools cutting music programs last year, he wanted to solve the problem and bring music back.



Ben Gray/Staff

A resident of the CHRIS Kids group home for teens in East Point gets a guitar lesson from Michael Connor (right), who started his Let There Be Music program to benefit the organization.

After talking to a teacher at Grady High School, Connor, 35, realized he did not have the resources to tackle that one. But he didn't give up. He took a smaller bite.

Connor, a music lover, guitar player and regular on the open-mic-night circuit, hooked up with Kevin Lynch, who had a need on a scale Connor could do something about.

Lynch works for CHRIS Kids, a metro Atlanta organization that runs group homes for teenagers. Fifty teens would be on the streets or in orphanages if not for CHRIS Kids. The organization is always on the lookout for programs and volunteers that will give the teenagers new opportunities or learning experiences.

Connor pitched an idea to Lynch of giving free music lessons to kids in

"[Michael] brought so much energy and enthusiasm for something that we did not provide in our homes," Lynch said.

"And you never know what kinds of activities a kid will respond to."

Lynch got the idea approved as a pilot project.

All they needed was instruments.

Connor went back to his musically inclined friends and found an answer.

Smith's Olde Bar in Atlanta agreed to hold a fund-raiser last July. A few bands pitched in, volunteers organized or donated instruments, money or items for an auction. Sam Ash music store agreed to sell instruments at cost to Connor's Let There Be Music program.

Variety Playhouse held another fund-raiser this month. The support brought in more than \$6,000 to buy instruments and an occasional treat to a restaurant meal for the students.

Connor began giving guitar lessons a year ago. A friend joined him. The program is growing slowly. They have five students.

Three more friends are lined up to begin giving lessons. And Wednesday, at a group home in East Point, Connor drafted a new student, a young man who just arrived and wants to learn piano.

Connor was there to teach Jeremy, a 17-year-old student, his guitar licks. He guided the teen through his latest weekly session of strumming and picking and finding new chords.

Jeremy said he has a long-time interest in the guitar.

"When I'm listening to a song, it's the best part," he said.

But he never had the opportunity to play before Connor showed up.

"Music is just a great skill to know," he said.

Connor, who works for IBM, said he would love for his program to grow to include most of the kids in CHRIS Kids' nine group homes.

And he has targeted his first school project, the Ron Clark Academy in south Atlanta.

Clark earned fame in North Carolina and New York City as a teaching magician who turned the most incorrigible students into achievers. He opened the school for 60 fifth and sixth graders this year using proceeds from his best-selling book about his teaching methods.

The school has a music room, but no music teacher.

"My next project is to find a sponsor for that," Connor said.