

LAST LOOK

FINDING A VOICE

Music program helps students emotional and social skills *By Emily Carter*

Since 2017, Modern Improvisational Music Appreciation (MIMA), a global music program that builds community through song-making, has been working with Elk Hill's private schools in multiple locations around Central Virginia. The program helps the students, many of whom have experienced traumatic events, improve their emotional and social skills as they write their own songs and music.

"We teach musical skills, including rhythm, melody and lyricism, and work around social and emotional life skills and individual confidence-building, which all feed back into the classroom community," says Jordan Perry, MIMA's regional educational director.

When working with Elk Hill students, "teaching artists" from the program explain the basic aspects of a song, such as the lyrics, chorus, bridge, etc. The class then uses this knowledge to create their own piece of music.

Perry says the material culled from improvisational activities and exercises is put together by the students into songs, which are then professionally recorded, usually at Charlottesville's Music Resource Center studio, where MIMA is based. The tunes are then published on to MIMA's SoundCloud account (soundcloud.com/mimamusic).

Elk Hill was established about 50 years ago as a home for orphaned boys. Now the residential middle through high school, which houses fewer than 20 stu-

dents, at its Goochland location (known as the Harambee School at Elk Hill) focuses on helping students who struggle with learning in a typical classroom setting.

"Students come here to get back on track to learn new skills, improve their behavior and maintain or improve their academic standing with the hope of either graduating or going back to their home schools," says Pete Glessman, former head of the Harambee School at Elk Hill. (Shawn Freeman, a former instructor of social work at John Tyler Community College, took his place on July 1.)

Glessman adds that MIMA has had a positive impact on students, with some becoming leaders in the classroom following the program.

"One day, [a student] was really having a difficult time staying focused," Glessman says. "[A] second student, not known for

his leadership, pulled the younger student aside, told him to change his behaviors and act appropriately for the situation."

Bon Secours Music Therapy Clinical Supervisor Stephanie Surber, a board-certified music therapist, says that adolescents involved in traumatic situations need music to help their brain mature.

"Music can create a safe space for kids, and when kids feel safe, they aren't in that trauma-fear response, and they are able to engage," she says.

The stomping, clapping and rapping coming from music classes at the Harambee School at Elk Hill are the sounds of students getting a second chance, turning their pain into poetry and setting their dreams to music. ■

Freelance writer Dina Weinstein also contributed to this article.

