

MAGIC AT THE CASTLE

March 01, 2019 at 9:31 am | By [Hillary Gavan \(mailto:hgavan@beloitdailynews.com\)](mailto:hgavan@beloitdailynews.com)



Hillary Gavan/Beloit Daily News (From left): The Castle Director of Operations Jacob Handrich stands with Music Teacher Johnny Wittnebel outside The Castle.

BELOIT - After five years in Beloit, The Castle continues to evolve.

More students are flocking to the Youth Unite Music School housed in the former Presbyterian Church. And, thanks to young leaders such as Director of Operations Jacob Handrich and Music Teacher Johnny Wittnebel, The Castle is able to not only teach kids music, but help them deal with their struggles in a positive way.

The Castle offers lessons to all ages and abilities in piano, drums, guitar, violin, voice and brass.

"Students get to bounce around and see what they can play," Handrich said. "We can teach a little bit of everything and see what sticks."

John and Jody Wittnebel purchased the old Presbyterian Church at 501 Prospect St. in 2013, hoping to create an arts and entertainment venue as well as offer a home for the nonprofit The Youth Unite, a group devoted to anti-bullying efforts. Over the years The Castle has held fundraisers, banquets, luncheons, variety shows and educational programming.

The past two years, The Castle has focused more efforts on its music lessons which continue to attract more students, including growing numbers of homeschoolers.

It also offers music therapy lessons designed to help children compartmentalize and forget their troubles as they reap the benefits of music. The therapy program is made possible thanks to a grant from Ecolab.

The Castle also offers music birthday parties and special lessons for groups, such as the Girl Scouts, who recently attended a musical field trip.

Wittnebel and Handrich said The Castle has a unique way of connecting with students and tailoring lessons to their interests.

"It's a one-on-one environment. Some students want to hit the books and others want to improvise and play pop music," Johnny Wittnebel said. "We make each lesson specific for that student."

Students also have two recitals a year to gain stage experience.

Mom Jennifer Bradley said her three children - Aiden, 10, and Emma, 10, and Curtis, 7 - have benefited from The Castle.

"We started out with everyone learning piano. They loved it. Jacob was amazing with the kids," Bradley said.

Bradley said Aiden has learned to play drums, Emma plays electric guitar and piano and Curtis takes piano lessons in addition to composing music at home.

"I've been very happy with everyone I've met at The Castle. They are passionate about music, they are exceptional with kids and they are engaging," Jennifer Bradley said.

"I get to have fun and play music at the same time," added Emma Bradley, 10.

Emma said her instructors are funny and are OK with her making mistakes.

"For piano I'm pretty far along. I'm just starting guitar, but I do know how to play 'Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer,'" she said.

At her piano recital Emma played "We Three kings" and she is working on "Ode to Joy" on the piano now.

"I do have more confidence," Emma said.

Mom Jennifer Bradley said the staff are also adept at switching gears to connect with kids as well as their adults.

Handrich noted families of students are invited to bring along siblings who can do crafts or play with the little keyboards and percussion instruments in the waiting area.

Both Handrich and Johnny Wittnebel are products of the rich musical environment of the Stateline Area. Handrich, a 2014 Beloit Memorial High School graduate who was in the school's jazz band, started at The Castle three years ago, taking over Greg Gerard's position. He's studying under David Newman, an adjunct professor and well-known pianist with Beloit Janesville Symphony Orchestra. He mostly plays piano but also plays drums, bass guitar and ukulele.

Music teacher Johnny Wittnebel played in jazz band at Parkview High School as well as in the UW Rock County Community Jazz Band for three years. He graduated from UW Whitewater with an education degree. Although his main instrument is guitar, he can also teach piano, drums and brass instruments such as trumpet, trombone, tuba and French horn. He can also teach banjo.

Johnny Wittnebel has been leading character education with The Youth Unite in area high schools. The assemblies will include anti-bullying and suicide awareness education.

Johnny Wittnebel was bullied as a child, and so was The Youth Unite founder Britnay Wittnebel. Currently an attorney who has passed anti-bullying legislation in Florida, Britnay Wittnebel will be making guest appearances at the upcoming assemblies.

The Castle also offers voice lessons by teacher Sara Lemen, a local singer and piano player. She holds a degree in Music from The Chicago Conservatory at Roosevelt University as well as extensive studies in vocal pedagogy at Northeastern Illinois University. Currently, she sings with the Rockford Bach Chamber Choir and the Rockford Operetta Party and is the music director at Prince of Peace Church in Rockton.

This summer, The Castle has plans to get outside of its four walls to entertain audiences and give its students more practice with live performances. It has a summer concert series planned for this summer, with visits to Riverside Park as well as mini-concerts on its front lawn.

Handrich, Lemen and Johnny Wittnebel all participate in the Beloit College Community Choir. Handrich and Johnny Wittnebel play at Willowick Assisted Living once a month in Janesville and Beloit and will be playing at the Beloit Art Center for its First Friday exhibits.

For more information people can visit www.thecastlebeloit.com or like 'The Castle at 501 Prospect' on Facebook.