

## “Music Makes it OK to Learn...”

### Catching up with Music Education Coordinator Mike D’Antoni

Mike D’Antoni is a well-rounded and passionate musician—the laundry list of instruments you might find him playing around Charlottesville includes bass, guitar, piano, ukulele, and violin...among others. However, when speaking with him, you quickly learn that he is truly enthusiastic about teaching and sharing the gift of music with others. We recently caught up with Mike as he juggled his time between instructing private instrument lessons at [Specialty Guitar Plus](#) (his daytime gig) and preparing for the [Charlottesville Toy lift](#) this Friday, December 2<sup>nd</sup>.



Those in the Charlottesville area have likely seen Mike play in an event or two as part of the Beatles cover group [Abbey Road](#), or perhaps they have heard him play classical guitar or old style bass at a wedding. We asked Mike how such an accomplished, seasoned performer still has the patience to work with beginners. “I think back on my own experience learning a new piece or instrument,” he told us, “and the sense of accomplishment you get saying, ‘I’ve made that sound good.’”

Over the years, Mike has seen music play a key role in building confidence, and with practically every new student, he said, “it reaffirms what you believe.” He recalled the many times a student would walk into his first lesson, “very shy and unsure,” and after a few

weeks, “You can physically see a change in the kid’s posture and self-esteem.”

“Pretty soon,” he added, “[a student’s] personality becomes linked to the instrument...when they play, their persona is released through that instrument.”

Mike has noticed another by-product of children learning music: it assists learning in other areas. Mike pointed out a very direct relationship: “Studies show that learning to read music helps reading in school.” But he also had a more philosophical observation, based on his experience: “Music makes it *okay* to learn.” In other words, while a child may not immediately respond to a test question or math problem; they can be introduced to the process of learning with something they enjoy, like music.

This idea led Mike to volunteer with Music for HOPE. When he found out about the group, he said, “You hope for something like this...where a kid who couldn’t have an instrument, for whatever reason, suddenly can.” Because Mike has seen first-hand the value of a child learning music, he became impressed with Music for HOPE’s dedication to providing instruments. The Charlottesville music store

where Mike works, Specialty Guitars Plus, is an [encore](#). drop-off location for used instruments (thanks to Mike and owner Larry Howard).

Mike D'Antoni discovered and polished his own music skills growing up in New Orleans, a city whose culture, lifestyle, and economy are very much based on music. Starting at age 14, Mike played gigs around town both in the more traditional New Orleans styles (Dixieland, Old Blues, Jazz) along with newer-style bands (Pop and Rock). He marveled at the musicianship of the artists around town, particularly those with regular shows in the tourist areas. "Why are these guys on Bourbon Street so good?" He said, "They're playing at a restaurant in the morning and for the lunch crowd, they're back between 5-7 to play for dinner...Then, with only a few breaks, they keep on playing to all hours of the night. We're not talking about a 3 hour gig, this is 7, 8...maybe 10 hours a day!"

Recognizing the amount of time these musicians put in to hone their craft, Mike took on as many jobs as he could, playing in bars and dives all over New Orleans. His hard work paid off and presented him with many memorable experiences. He was grateful to open for legend Fats Domino, "He was there for the beginning of Rock n' Roll, how do you not get excited about that?"

Mike also recalled his role in the rhythm section for a play at a New Orleans theater: "I'm playing bass in the background band, and unannounced, [Pete Fountain](#) joins us. He walked on stage dry, without warm up or practice, and effortlessly put together his clarinet. He played flawless, of course, and after the song was over, walked back down in the audience and watched the rest of the play!"

About 20 years ago, Mike moved to Charlottesville and immediately began sharing his musical talents at many venues around town. He has been giving private lessons in guitar, piano, and other instruments for about that long as well. Since he had a family, the idea of playing in bars all the time was no longer as realistic as it was years ago. As a longtime Beatles fan, he could not pass up the opportunity to join Abbey Road and play 7-8 larger local events a year. Crowds watching Abbey Road are entertained not only by the familiar classic tunes, but by watching the number of instruments Mike will play in one particular show.

As *Music Education Coordinator* for Music for HOPE, Mike said he's "excited to get a hold here in Charlottesville." His immediate goal is to grow Music for HOPE's presence in the local Community. D'Antoni and Director Mike Jones recently met with the Charlottesville City Schools Assistant Superintendent and the School Fine Arts coordinator. Mike Jones told us, "The meeting went well. We will be further discussing our possible partnership, and bring some new music programs to Charlottesville."



Mike D'Antoni also helps out with Charlottesville's annual [Toy Lift](#). The Toy Lift collects and distributes toys to children who otherwise may not have them for the holidays. One year, Mike and his wife Jeanne noticed that the all-volunteer staff was short handed. "We asked if we could help them box," Mike said, "and we've been helping ever since." Jeanne is now in charge of the "Book Lift."

Along with books and toys, guitars are sometimes requested by children. "The Toy Lift usually gets about 5-7 requests [for guitars]." Last month, D'Antoni and Mike Jones spent a whole day re-stringing, repairing and tuning 6 acoustic guitars. Music for HOPE then donated the refurbished guitars to the Toy Lift so that the gift of music can be given this Holiday Season.

Mike D'Antoni enjoyed the time he spent fixing the guitars. In fact, he went out of his way to point out that it was in no way a burden or a chore. He did, however, think it was important to emphasize the work that our volunteers do every day. "Music for HOPE is real people, doing real work, from the Director on down," he said, "and we are just beginning to crack the surface."

We hope that by telling Mike's story, we will point out just how genuine, unique, and hard-working the individuals who make up Music for HOPE really are. Through Mike's experience, we've learned the importance of music and the effect it can have on children. While this profile could not begin to do justice to Mike, or the wonderful experience of speaking with him, hopefully it will inspire a donation, a volunteer or two...and if it can motivate somebody to give 1/10 of the enthusiasm Mike D'Antoni has, then Music for HOPE truly will be fortunate.

