

When I returned to playing the piano at age 30, I was very anxious to be "the old me" and to pick up all the pieces of a shattered repertoire, technique, and ego. I was still in the beginning of my special education teaching career, but understood the challenges and obstacles involved to create a special education music program. My students needed a music program and I needed to teach according to my abilities, not my disabilities, so I practiced and did everything above and beyond the pain in my neck, shoulders and hip.

To develop a curriculum and classroom projects, I needed to push myself into areas of music activities in which I was less confident. I learned to sing, play jazz chord progressions and play a few guitar chords for song accompaniments. I studied composition theory and expanded my repertoire to include Caribbean songs and other folk music styles. It was important to include popular music familiar to my students.

While some of my students are capable of singing words, others are not able to say any words. Most of my challenged students are capable of singing vocal utterances or syllables. In my earliest choruses, I would have my students sing syllables on the melodies of classical music selections I played on the piano. One of my students with autism sang the melody of the entire first movement of the Beethoven *Pathétique Sonata*. I arranged Mozart Sonatas with very simple harmonic changes and would sing with my students. Later, I included songs from musicals, pop hits and show music by Irving Berlin and George M. Cohan.

Over time we added other instruments such as chromatic xylophones, roll up pianos, violin and guitar. I also had my students keep the beat with percussion instruments. We formed a percussion band and had a great time with rhythmic accompaniments to Mozart's *Turkish Rondo* and Lecuona's *Malaguena*.

At times throughout out my career as a music teacher in New York's Special Education District, I have needed to take my own initiative to acquire appropriate instruments and equipment for my classroom. People have donated instruments and I conducted fund raising events to raise money for new equipment.

The very first piano I received was donated by a teacher who just wanted to help me get started. There have always been good and kind people in my school organization who were "there for me" from all levels. When there have been challenges, there have been solutions. I am very grateful to many people.

Currently in my classroom, I have three wonderful upright acoustic pianos; a *Ritmuller*, a *Robertson & Son*, and a *Hardman*. I acquired the *Ritmuller* from money raised at a piano recital event which I performed at the Bargemusic performance space on the East River near the Brooklyn Bridge in New York City. I received the *Robertson & Son* as a donated gift from a wonderful and generous supporter of my special education music program. The *Hardman* was also donated by another teacher. I purchased our classroom violins and other equipment with my own money. Our midi keyboard instruments, chromatic xylophones, percussion instruments, acoustic guitars and roll-up pianos were purchased with my school allotted *Teacher's Choice* and *Project Arts* money.

My web site, specialneedsinmusic.com, evolved out of my classroom experiences and growth as a musician. The symbiotic nature of teaching students with special needs and my own need to continuously develop musically, created a trove of insights into music and special needs education. My classroom became a point of unity in my life. It was the place where overcoming challenges, both my students' and my own, and discovering a vast array of musical styles and activities met. The web site has music activities, workshops, assessments and curriculum development that cover diverse styles. World folk, classical music, jazz, and other various styles are included for learners of all abilities.



Kaila Rochelle performing at her Bargemusic fund raiser piano recital