

# Freedom in Music Project Enriches Lives of At-Risk Youth

By Tania Soussan

Students at schools from Santa Rosa, to Moriarty, to Albuquerque have benefitted from donations of guitars from the Freedom in Music Project, which strives to enrich the lives of at-risk youth by making music more accessible to them.

The Project, which focuses on Title I schools, has donated a total of 253 steel string guitars and 40 classical guitars — along with extra strings, bags, straps, electronic tuners and humidifiers — to schools, youth detention centers and recovery programs.

Alamosa Elementary School has received 28 guitars from the project, allowing some students to take guitars home for practice, said Phil Oliveira, who runs the nonprofit, which was founded in 2011.

“The kids really benefitted from it. ... In my part of town, not all these kids can afford guitars,” said Alvaro Ramazzini, principal of Alamosa Elementary.

Alamosa has a genius hour during the school day in which students can participate in an activity of their choice, such as the Guitar Club. Club members play at school performances, and Ramazzini said he hopes they will be able to take the stage at the Freedom in Music Project’s upcoming Blues Festival fundraiser.

The 11th annual Blues Festival is scheduled for 4-10 p.m. September 23 at the Lobo Theater in Albuquerque. Tickets cost \$20. Blues singer-songwriter and Freedom in Music Project spokesman Cody Jasper of Amarillo, Texas, will headline the event. The High Desert Blues Band and Levi Platero also will perform. In addition, there will be a screening of the biographical documentary “Hallelujah,” which examines the life and influence of singer-songwriter Leonard Cohen.

The Moriarty and Santa Rosa school districts also received donations for their band and guitar programs, and Albuquerque Public



Schools has received 92 guitars in total.

“My kids and I are very grateful to have been beneficiaries of that project,” said Cibola High School teacher Eduardo N. Trujillo, director of guitar and AP music theory at the school. “I was able to use those guitars for students that weren’t able to purchase one to use at home.”

The long-term loans for motivated children have been instrumental because “if you want to get good at an instrument, you’ve got to practice,” he said.

Playing an instrument has many benefits, Trujillo and Oliveira said. “Studies have shown music is one of the few activities that turn on the whole brain,” Trujillo said.

Oliveira agreed, calling music “a universal language” and adding that playing guitar is good for learning because it engages both the right and left sides of the brain.

At Cibola High School, the students also develop teamwork skills as they learn to play together in an ensemble. “For some kids not into sports or other clubs, they learn to work with others for a common goal,” Trujillo said.

Moriarty High School received 12 guitars. “It’s definitely an amazing gift,” said Justin McMurdo, director of guitar for the school district. There are about 150 students in the guitar program, and most don’t have instruments of their own. The donation allowed McMurdo to lend some guitars out for home practice.

“Music is a gift,” Oliveira said. “I firmly believe that the vibrations of the music have the

power to heal people.”

It’s a gift that Oliveira and his wife, Linda, are dedicated to sharing with as many schoolchildren and at-risk youth as they can. They have received grants from the Albuquerque Community Foundation and others. In addition, they organize fundraising events and auction off guitars signed by professional musicians such as Steve Vai, Ace Frehley and Les Paul.

“We’re very blessed,” Oliveira said. “We’re very grateful to everybody that’s helped us over the years. Every cent goes to buying guitars for the kids. We’re a 100 percent volunteer organization.”

Oliveira is a longtime musician. He played bass and blues guitar with a band while living in New England but had to dramatically scale back his playing due to health problems. Now, he plays a few times a year and plans to take to the stage with the High Desert Blues Band at the Blues Festival.

One aim of the program is to support youth who are battling addiction. Between them, the Oliveiras have 52 years of recovery from drug and alcohol addiction. After moving to New Mexico 13 years ago and in the early days of the Freedom in Music Project, the Oliveiras visited youth detention centers to share their stories. They also donated guitars, drums and other equipment to the Bernalillo County Juvenile Detention Center, Oliveira said.

For more information, visit [thefreedominmusicproject.com](http://thefreedominmusicproject.com).

The Freedom in Music PROJECT

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