

David Helfand, right, accompanies students Jesse Dent, top left (with rainstick), and Mark Krusenstjerra, lower left (with harp), in his class at the Hilyard Community Center.



Breaking the Silence

Harpist David Helfand brings the joy of music to disabled adults

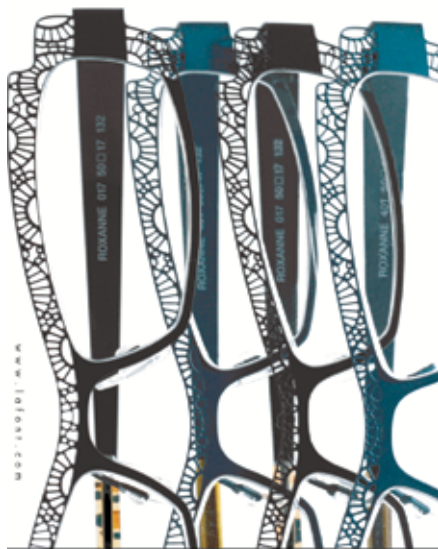
STORY BY SHARON SCHUMAN
PHOTOS BY DAVID LOVEALL

WHEN YOU ENTER David Helfand's living room, you see Celtic harps everywhere. There are the two that he plays, and one more in a painting on the wall.

The harp is his favorite instrument. He has carried it throughout the Northwest to performances at the Hult Center, the Oregon Country Fair and the Seattle Folk Festival. He has also performed his compositions at international harp conferences in Indiana and California, as well as on tour in England and Israel. If you listen to one of his solo CDs, you will hear more than harp, and you will swear that there must be a whole band: In fact, he layers tracks of other instruments he plays, including guitars, keyboards, percussion and an over-sized Eastern European mandolin called the mandocello. Only the violin playing is outsourced.

It's a unique blend of meditative folk-ethnic music that Helfand has created—largely self-taught, often inspired by his travels. When he came back from Israel, for instance, he retuned one of his harps to create unique harmonies. It is perhaps because of his architectonic approach to building music from the ground floor up that Helfand has been so successful at creating musical opportunities for adults with developmental conditions.

In a six-week class called "Introduction to the Joy of Music" at the Hilyard Community Center, he teaches eight to 10 students with Down syndrome, autism and other conditions, for an hour each week. Helfand's style is collaborative, as he responds to each student's passions. It is also highly inventive, as the artist devises ways for them to play instruments to which they have never before been exposed. Some students have special musical abilities, but Helfand is able to break music into such fundamental and contagious elements of rhythm and pitch that a cooperative spirit sweeps every student into one shared musical journey.



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Student Stacy Adair plays guitar.

Helfand often builds a performance upon a foundation of something called a “rain stick,” a hollow tube filled with pebbles that simulates the sounds of the rain forest. A winter class recently culminated in a 30-minute program, performed before friends and family, which included African drumming, the Macarena, an Egyptian dance and two Beatles songs.

This eclectic program, recorded by Iris Media, was the result of ideas that came from the students themselves. Helfand, with the assistance of an intern from the University of Oregon, marked keyboards and frets, arrayed drums and distributed rain sticks in such a way that students were able to hit the right notes at the right moments to create music together.

This class is not Helfand’s first community-oriented musical adventure. In 1999 he co-founded ACCHORD, a nonprofit music-mentorship program that provided free lessons and instruments to at-risk youth. For seven years he spent many Saturday mornings inspiring young people to learn to play guitars that they eventually were able to take home.

In times when music is often considered either the untouchable province of performing experts, observed by audiences in reverential silence, or a frill to be abandoned in the first round of budget cuts, David Helfand shows us that it is neither. On his CDs and in his classes, he demonstrates that it is a natural and exhilarating experience to build a musical performance, starting with the basic rhythm of the human heart and ending with the reassuring rustle of rain.

To learn more about Helfand’s work, visit his website at www.davidhelfand.com. For information about his class at the Hilyard Community Center, call 541/682-5311. ■