

Hope Academy of Music to keep beat in virtual classes

Music can be a soothing outlet during stressful times, and leaders at the Punta Gorda Symphony are working to grow the Hope Academy of Music in Charlotte County schools.

The program experienced promising growth in early 2020, prior to current coronavirus social-distancing circumstances. Instructors are eager for a return to school, and are currently exploring virtual classes to augment in-person music education offerings.

Beth Morrison is an educator at Neil Armstrong Elementary School as well as a musician. She's been a member of the Punta Gorda Symphony for the past five years, and she's served as the music summer camp director as well as an instructor.

Morrison is partnering with Craig Badinger, executive director of the Punta Gorda Symphony. Together, they are putting together a program to teach virtual music classes.

"The classes have not started yet, but we are excited," Badinger said. "We are in the early stages and still in the exploratory zone."

The Hope Academy of Music was founded [in its current form] by Ennis "Buz" Bisbano in 2012. The program is driven by passionate, enthusiastic music instructors who have visited local schools weekly to lend music instruments and to provide music instruction to interested students in an after-school group setting. Hope Academy at its peak has employed 10 instructors serving 140 students in four participating schools.

Badinger and Morrison are working on growing the Hope Academy of Music virtual programs in Charlotte County schools.

The organization received a grant last fall from the Florida Division of Cultural Affairs to focus on growth.

"We hired more instructors and enlisted school employees to coordinate the expansion," Badinger said. Morrison added that in just a few months, more than 70 students were added at Neil Armstrong Elementary to the Hope Academy of Music program. She's currently using video conferencing programs like Zoom and giving lessons through the app.



left to right: Ellen Harvey, Patricia Pasca, Craig Badinger, Ennis "Buz" Bisbano, Aaron Lucas, Maestro Raffaele Ponti, Ed Toscano, Beth Morrison

"We can also do group lessons that way," she said. "The kids really love it. As we've moved online with our education, we've found more ways to adapt to the new format and now we're looking at how to interact and connect students with live and prerecorded music."

Assignments are given via Google Classroom. Students can record videos of their work and send recordings to the teachers.

Badinger hopes to incorporate the platforms Morrison is using in her online classes for the symphony summer camp if it gets pushed to a virtual camp.

"Whatever we'll be using for Hope Academy we hope to use in the summer camp in June which is likely to be virtual," he said.

Hope Academy of Music owns close to 50 instruments that it lends to interested students with a nominal deposit fee, and provides weekly group instruction in after-school classes.

The students return the instruments at the end of the school year, and Hope Academy uses the summer to clean, repair and maintain the instruments.

The program is run on a lean annual budget of less than \$25,000. When the opportunity arose in late Summer 2019, Punta Gorda Symphony agreed to adopt the program, overseeing operations and administration.

Longtime instructor Mike Parmelee is particularly proud of a program at the Punta Gorda Middle School.

"Band director Scott Courtney welcomed our teachers to a once-weekly visit with his students," Parmelee said. "While band rehearsals were in progress our instructors took individual students aside to teach them one-on-one or in small groups. Gratification has come from seeing a number of these students being rewarded with a place in the county honors band."

Ellen Harvey, curriculum specialist for Charlotte County Schools and board director emeritus for Hope Academy of Music, helped guide the transition.

"These are great music education programs, and they all feed into each other," she said. "Third-graders playing recorder in the Symphony's annual Young Person's Concert get a taste of music, then they go on to the Symphony's summer camp. Now there's more opportunity for them to continue with an expanded Hope Academy. We're proud to be making this happen, and we'll find a way despite restrictions on in-person gatherings."

"Hope Academy is the perfect addition to our youth education programs," said Morrison, who plays flute and piccolo in the Punta Gorda Symphony. "There's a real desire for more music exposure and music instruction."

Parents of interested students may inquire by contacting coordinator Patricia Pasca through the Punta Gorda Symphony office. For more information visit **[PGSymphony.org](https://www.pgsymphony.org)** or email to **education@PGSymphony.org** or call **941-205-5996**.