

**Support Promotes Student Activity and Access: Grants and Play It Again, Ithaca**

By Heather Zimar, Ithaca College Graduate Student and IPEI Intern

Once a week, 15 fourth and fifth graders give up recess to convene in the music room at Belle Sherman Elementary School and participate in the “Magnificent Mariachi Music” program, started just over a year ago by Cindy Daly, Ithaca City School District (ICSD) music teacher. The program combines performance arts, Spanish language instruction and study of Mexican culture. It is funded in part by the Fine Arts Booster Group (FABG) and the Ithaca Public Education Initiative (IPEI).

“The program is a multicultural offering that helps support the Mexican culture through music,” Daly said. “It’s wonderful to see students show support for this culture.”

With funds from a FABG Mini-Grant and an IPEI Teacher Grant, Daly is able to purchase instruments and sound equipment for use at the school and in the community. In addition, Daly will collaborate with community partner Carolina Osorio-Gil, artist-in-residence at Cornell University and a founder of CULTURA, in a musical series later this year. IPEI Teacher Grants are awarded to ICSD teachers who create innovative projects that bring community members into active participation in the classroom. FABG Mini-Grants are awarded to teachers for programs that support the arts in schools.

“We came upon the idea when [ICSD] was cutting programs. If it wasn’t for IPEI and FABG, we’d have none of this.”

Members of the ensemble became interested after watching a video of professional Mariachi performers at a recruitment assembly, and when trying out the instruments during classroom visits by Daly. Four of the 15 musicians never played an instrument until they joined the group. “That’s one of the exciting things about the program,” Daly said. “We’re including some students who want to try something new but who weren’t hooked by the regular band or orchestra.”

The ensemble includes three trumpets, four violins, seven guitars, and one vihuela, a high-pitched, five-string guitar. Daly said the vihuela, new this year, will likely attract more students to the ensemble in the fall. “It adds a brilliance and brightness to the group,” Daly said. “And it works for smaller players.”

Musicians also rotate playing the guitarrón, a large acoustic bass guitar, which is light in weight but is almost as tall as and wider than the students. “They are getting more familiar,” Daly said. “They are checking it out.”

The full ensemble meets every week, and sectionals meet once per month to learn new techniques and practice in a smaller group. “The program gives students a chance to play together who would not normally play together,” Daly said. “It gives them a whole new chance to experience teamwork.”

Sophia Ferwerda, a fourth-grader, said she joined the group because she liked the sound of Mariachi music and wanted to learn how to play it. Ferwerda, a violin player, is now learning the trumpet. “I like the sound the trumpet gives off and how it is pretty easy to play because it’s only three valves,” she said. “You can go really high and really low on it.”

Fourth-grader Natalie Boucher said her family inspired her to join the ensemble. Boucher, a violinist and pianist, is now learning the guitar and the guitarrón. “I really like the guitar because my dad plays it, and I really wanted to learn Mariachi because I have one sister who is fluent in Spanish, and my other sister is almost fluent.”

“I like the music we play,” Boucher added.

Students sing songs like “Mi Chacra” in Spanish, and Daly speaks the language when counting rhythm and instructions. “They’ve got certain phrases and commands down,” she said.

## ***Ten Stories for Ten Years Continued***

New sound equipment, funded by the grants, will enable students' voices to be better heard during performances later this year. "It's very important because these musicians don't have the strength in their voices at this age to be able to project their voices above the instruments," Daly said. "The microphones will allow them to sing in a healthy way."

Additional equipment such as a small, portable PA system will be available to others in the school as well as in the community. "The sound equipment allows our group to be in balance, and it also will allow us to visit other venues to share our music with others," Daly said. "This community connection is an important part of our program."

"We wouldn't have been able to do any of this without the grants," Daly added.

The Fine Arts Booster Group (FABG) is celebrating its 10th year. The all-volunteer group's first effort was *A Festival of Talents*, a showcase of school talent and an art exhibit, designed to raise money for the purchase of instruments because the district instrument supply was small and in disrepair. *Play It Again, Ithaca*, a musical instrument recycling program was established. The boosters collect and refurbish used instruments and then donate them to the district for student use. To date, more than 120 instruments have been collected. Today the district has a system for instrument inventory and replacement. The boosters enrich this system with grants for special and unique instruments, as well as supporting experiences for kids.

FABG, founded in 2001, is an affiliate of IPEI and works in partnership with the ICSD to advocate, support and celebrate all the arts for all the kids. The district and boosters work in partnership to address student needs. To see funded grant projects, visit the booster website at [www.fabgithaca.org/receive](http://www.fabgithaca.org/receive).

IPEI is a community based not-for-profit 501(c)(3) organization that develops supportive community and private sector relationships with the Ithaca City School District. Founded in 1996, IPEI is committed to connecting school and community through collaboration, engagement, gifts and grants. For more information, see [www.ipei.org](http://www.ipei.org) or contact 256-IPEI (4734) or [ipei@ipei.org](mailto:ipei@ipei.org).

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