Learning Resource Spotlight: Sarah Billerbeck

Sarah, as anyone who’s watched a holiday choir performance or perhaps the 5th- and 8th-grade musicals will know, teaches music to all our K-1-2s and 3-4-5s, and also 6-7 general music (one trimester each) in addition to helping middle schoolers with the musical. She is fun and sometimes silly and truly cares about each of her students. Beyond curricular connections, Sarah’s work dovetails with the K-8 classrooms by allowing kids to express themselves in ways that they might not be able to in more academic areas. “In addition,” says Sarah, “many of the same concepts and ideas – particularly around Stanley’s 7 goals for learners – show up in my classes just like in classrooms. I think that the classroom teachers do an amazing job of laying the foundation for learning and critical thinking and cooperation and that makes my job easier!”

What you may not know? She likes to do folk dancing with the kids, which is an example of Sarah’s more fantastic side, and offers up for consideration a quote from Albus Dumbledore in Rowling’s Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone: “Ah, music! A magic beyond all we do here!” Says Sarah, “I love this quote because it highlights the mysterious and wondrous qualities of music. Music is powerful because it is universal. It transcends time, space, culture, identity, and weaves a thread between human beings in a way rarely possible by other means.

“One thing I love about Stanley is that it is a noisy and boisterous school. The social interactions of children and adults are honored here and viewed as an integral part of the learning process. There is nothing quite so wonderful as hearing children and adults talking together, laughing together, problem solving together, singing together, and sharing themselves with each other in a way that truly honors the humanity in every person.”

A teacher of music since 1996, Sarah has a bachelor’s degree in Music Education and Spanish and a Master’s Degree in Early Childhood Education with teaching licenses in both K-12 Music and Early Childhood Special Education. She is also a certified Orff Schulwerk teacher and taught for four years in public elementary and middle school before taking time off to have children. During that precious time, Sarah started her own business teaching early childhood music classes.

Sarah visited Stanley when pursuing her Master’s degree. A couple years later, in 2011, a friend tipped her off about a K-1-2 music position, she applied, and the rest as they say... Gradually, Sarah added more teaching duties to include kids in grades K-8. “The child-centered philosophy at Stanley fits so well with both my personal teaching philosophy and with my training in Orff Schulwerk,” says Sarah. “In addition, Stanley's commitment to social justice fits well with my own values.”

Currently living that devotion to inclusivity, Sarah is also the Director of Music for Children and Youth at Jefferson Unitarian Church in Golden, and she speaks at various conferences and parent groups on the topic of Music and Language Development, particularly for children with disabilities. Sarah is active in the disability rights community and feels strongly committed to inclusion for children with disabilities in all aspects of school and community.

“I am so proud of the many and various performances that the students give at Stanley,” says Sarah. “But I am most proud of the little ways the children show me what they have learned through music. For example, during a recent K-1-2 music class, the children were singing the song ‘Little Bunny Foo Foo.’ We hadn't spent much time discussing the meaning of the song and one child raised his hand and asked if the good Fairy was so good then why did she do a mean thing to Little Bunny Foo Foo by turning him into a goon? This led to a wonderful and rich discussion about the nature of mistakes, and the appropriateness of punishment. It was wonderful to have the opportunity during class to listen to the ideas of the students and allow them to puzzle through possible other solutions to Little Bunny Foo Foo's problem of ‘bopping’ field mice on the head!

“I want the students at Stanley to love music as much as I do,” adds Sarah. “I want to give them experiences that illustrate how music can uplift them and make them feel part of something special. I also want them to have time in their days when they are able to break free and express themselves.”

In the spare hours outside of Sarah’s busy teaching schedule, she like to spend time with her husband and kids. Travel,
while not often accommodated in her schedule, is also a joy for Sarah, as are reading, movies and playing music with friends and family. Sarah grew up in Colorado, living out of state for 10 years before coming back to settle down where her relations all live within five minutes! “I have lots of good friends with whom I like to spend time, and I have three great kids. One of my kids happens to have Down syndrome so I have the privilege of being part of the disability community. Having a kid with Down syndrome has shaped my outlook on life in many great ways as I have learned new ways to measure success. I think I am a much better parent, teacher and friend because of what I have learned from my son. Because of my son and the experiences I have had from being his mom, I have developed a fierce commitment to inclusion for all people.”