

Mentor, musician, mother - Monroe  
By Ellyn Moran Santiago/The Sun Staff  
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"Go on. Don't only practice your art your art, but force your way into its secrets. Art deserves that. For it and knowledge can raise man to the divine." Beethoven

WESTERLY -- A stack of folders filled with remembrances from students past (including a three-page essay dubbed 'A Teacher with Faith and Love'), news clippings, a decade's worth of concert programs and a few sheets of faded sheet music rest precariously on the edge of her dining room table. Kathleen Curran Monroe, Kathy to her friends, adjusts her glasses.

"Here, look at this. Emma Leinhaas wrote this for me. Remember her? Violin? She's graduating from Brown (University) this month. She's so sweet and very talented," Monroe passes the cobalt blue binder that contains the essay written by Leinhaas about "one of my many heroes and mentors."

Monroe, mother of three children, teens Andrew and John, and fifth-grader Elena, and wife of John, a New London-based family doctor, has the disposition of a less harried woman: the darkest day and always a smile. Monroe is constantly going; on a mission to at once raise her family and awareness of the importance of music in the lives of people, especially children. An accomplished cellist, Monroe teaches violin and cello to the very young, she has a 5-year-old student, and the very old, a woman nearly 80 comes bi-weekly for her cello class with Monroe.

"Music is something that once kids learn, they'll always have it. Music can take them away, out of difficult life situations. It's such a deep thing, that connection to music and I know that the learning, the playing, motivates kids, they develop self-esteem. When schools are looking for answers on how best to educate, motivate students, they should look to music," the words tumble breathlessly; her passion for her craft and the impact she knows the art of strings has on young people is contagious. "The thing is, it's the kids that can't afford music lessons, and they're who I feel sorry for. It shouldn't be a privilege to learn to play music."

Monroe was born to a musical mother. Aurora Spadea Curran, a renowned violinist and RI public school music teacher, instilled her passion -- and talent -- for music and string instruments in particular, in her children including Monroe and her sister Susan Culp, an accomplished violist. But Curran also instilled the desire to teach music (see related story).

Monroe earned her bachelor's degree in music education from the University of Rhode Island and her master's degree in cello performance from the New England Conservatory of Music. A longtime cellist for Musica Dolce, an ensemble of classical musicians, Monroe splits her time between private string lessons for around 12 students, music education, the Musica Dolce youth string group, which includes rehearsals and the business of running the group, her weekend vocation as an in-demand cellist with the Music Performance Series and the Connecticut String trio, her family and home.

"A good kind of busy," she described.

As director of the Musica Dolce Youth String Ensemble since its inception in 1995, she's taught, nurtured and mentored countless young violinists, cellists, and violists. The ensemble has grown over the years to around 60 musicians -- from Connecticut and Rhode Island -- ranging in age from 7 to 18. The MDYSE performs holiday, spring and Halloween concerts, the latter more popular each year featuring family-friendly performance art and instrument and mask making as part of the event, as well as performances at area schools. The ensemble practices at the Pawcatuck Neighborhood Center on Monday nights.

"When we produce music together, it transports us on a journey," Monroe said. "Music makes kids feel good about themselves. What's better than that?"

Monroe hopes to enlist some of the talented young violin, cello, and bass string musicians into quartets "for remuneration, to show them there's that kind of value for their work, too."

"What I do, why I do it? It's my passion for making a difference for kids. That's what drives me. I know music is a mirror of the soul. It transports and can make such a difference in kids' lives."

Monroe the mom spent Mother's Day preparing for the Musica Dolce Youth String Ensemble annual banquet. The event, to be held tonight at the Westerly Yacht Club, is like a big cast party and quasi-graduation; a number of her young musicians will be entering college and have played their last MDYSE concert with Monroe. But maybe not the last time they'll perform together.

"I'd love to be able to play in a quartet with them one day. That would be an honor," she said.

Like Hilary Castle, of Stonington, a locally renowned violinist who started her career with youth string ensemble and Monroe in 1996. Or Leinhaas, of Westerly, who will graduate from Brown and has been a member of the Brown University Orchestra. Or Caitlyn Craig of Charlestown, a graduate student studying to be a college music professor.

"Isn't that wonderful," Monroe asks rhetorically.

### Oh, Fiddlestix!

The pre-violin training instrument created by Kathleen Curran Monroe's mother Aurora Spadea Curran consists of painted-red wooden spoons used by novices, generally kids, as violins and bows. The 'violin' Fiddlestix has one string that can be tuned. The 'bow' has a synthetic hair, which is treated as a real bow in that rosin must be applied to the string.

Monroe said she has had great success with the simple, inexpensive and practical instrument.

It performs so well, Monroe said, that she is currently pursuing an opportunity to produce the instrument. One idea, she said, is to work in conjunction with a Rhode Island faith-based agency that assists formerly incarcerated individuals with re-entry and workplace skills.

“We know it works and for kids, and adults, really, that want to see if the violin is for them, or ones that can’t yet afford a violin, this is a great place to start,” she said. Not to mention a wonderful way, she said, to honor her mother.

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