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Fox Chapel Area



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Spectrum band members perform at Cobriwoodstock this summer: Christopher Brozek on drums; Bobby McGrath-keys/vocals; Erin Mullins-bass; Justin Laus-guitar.

Gifted MUSICIANS

Band Together Pittsburgh provides musical mentoring for those on the autism spectrum.

BY JENNIFER BROZAK



In John Vento's world, the term "disabled" would not exist. Rather, he prefers the phrase "differently abled."

Vento is the founder of the Nied's Hotel Band, a prominent Pittsburgh rock band.

Together with Ron "Moondog" Esser, Vento has founded the organization Band Together Pittsburgh, which is focused on providing mentoring to children with

autism and their families.

The idea for Band Together Pittsburgh developed organically after Vento's band began sharing the stage with several musically talented young people who all are on the autism spectrum.

The players initially sat in with the Nied's Hotel Band individually, but soon, their parents began communicating about the possibility of forming a formal band. Aptly named "Spectrum," the band's first official gig took place at Esser's club, the famed Moondog's in Blawnox. Since then, the band has played gigs at the Lamp Theatre in

Photos by Melissa Shontz Photography



John Vento of Nied's Hotel Band

Irwin, Idlewild Park, the City of Asylum on the North Side, the Pittsburgh Autism Walk in Schenley Park, and at Cobriwoodstock, Vento's performance venue in Gibsonia.

"It was obvious how much these performances meant to the kids and their families," says Vento. "Ronnie and I started talking about formalizing what we were doing with these kids, and the idea for Band Together just grew from there."

Band Together Pittsburgh has two main priorities: first, to nurture the talent of young musicians who are on the autism spectrum, and second, to raise awareness by providing "meaningful and fulfilling" opportunities to perform in front of a live audience.

"There are a lot of people [on the autism spectrum] who have way more potential than we give them credit for," says Esser.

"People look at them as being disabled, but they're not. They're not unintelligent. They're different. They've been given different gifts."

According to the American Music Therapy Association, people with autism spectrum disorder often show heightened musical ability, which in turn can help to improve their sensory processing and communication skills. As such, music can be an effective tool to augment other therapies.

"We want to set an example for other people who are differently abled and their families — that just because you're different, it doesn't mean that you can't be a successful member of society," says Esser.

The organization, which is currently working with about 10 young musicians, has no paid staff. It has achieved 501(c)(3) status and is in the process of fundraising and

teaming up with members of the local music community who will provide mentoring, lessons and guidance when performing on stage. Eventually, the organization would like to expand beyond children with autism and provide services to at-risk youth as well.

"This is all very new, so we're letting the organization take the direction it needs to take, based on the needs of the community," says Esser. "Right now, we're laying the groundwork."

The duo has been overwhelmed by the generosity and interest of local musicians who have offered their time and services.

"Music is a vehicle that is close to all of our hearts," says Esser. "This is our way of giving back." ■



Ronny "Moondog" Esser

» To learn more about Band Together Pittsburgh, visit bandtogetherpgh.org.