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From left, Amelia Dolton, Jacob Wessel, Sophia Dolton (hidden), and mom Carrie Dolton get a quick lesson from teacher Laurie Richards.

Keys to Harmony: Key to Learning Piano

By Elizabeth A. Elliott
The Daily Record

Have you ever heard a person playing piano and wish you would have continued with the lessons your parents ‘forced’ you to take? Did you quit because you struggled with the method of teaching?

Keys to Harmony, located off 108th and Center Streets, offers students a different way of learning called Simply Music, which takes a “playing-based” approach to piano lessons.

Laurie Richards is the owner of Keys to Harmony.

“The longer I have taught Simply Music and realized its potential, the more passionate I have become about my business,” she said. “Keys to Harmony has evolved as I outgrew my home studio, moved into a commercial space, then expanded into an adjacent bay in 2010.”

She taught piano lessons in her home beginning about 10 years ago using traditional methods before she discovered Simply Music. Richards said she learned about the technique when she was teaching Kindermusik.

“Once I began exclusively teaching this method, my business began to grow steadily,” she said.

Simply Music, created by Australian Neil Moore, is a hands-on keyboard and piano methodology. It is the largest playing-based music education institution in the world. There are approximately 600 locations through the United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand.

“Traditionally, students learn to read music as a means of learning how to play. In reality, this is like expecting a child to read and spell as a means of learning how to talk. Children learn to speak naturally without needing to first understand the symbols that represent their language,” said Richards. “The symbols come later, when they have a context within which to understand the symbols. This is how Simply Music approaches music education.”

“Our students build a huge repertoire of music, typically 30 to 50 songs, during their first year,” added Richards. “At that point they begin the reading program, utilizing their repertoire to aid the learning process.”

The mission of Keys to Harmony is, “to maximize the likelihood that our students will retain music as a lifelong companion, and to afford as many people as possible this amazing opportunity,” according to Richards.

Students at Keys to Harmony learn a variety of musical styles.

“Students begin by learning contemporary, classical, blues and accompaniment (learning to read chord symbols),” she said. “We also encourage and teach composition and improvisation skills from the very beginning.

“As students progress through the curriculum, they continue to develop these areas while broadening their experience with our reading programs, blues improvisation, jazz program, and others.”

Richards said the benefits to teaching piano through the Simply Music program are many.

“There is a much higher student retention rate; your income potential is higher as a result of teaching groups; and you are able to experience the joy of bringing music into people’s lives immediately,” she said. “The ability to teach anybody to express themselves musically, including those with physical handicaps or developmental delays, is another plus, as is making a contribution toward founder Neil Moore’s mission of ‘a world where everyone plays’.”

“There are outstanding coaching and leadership programs offered to Simply Music teachers and the added benefit of “camaraderie with Simply Music colleagues – locally, nationally, and internationally – in an environment where we do not view each other as competitors.”

Richards said there have been many positive responses to Simply Music.

“Some adult students are brought to tears with the success they experience – something they never thought possible, and often a lifelong dream,” she said. “I regularly hear comments from parents such as, ‘I wish Simply Music would have been around when I was a kid. Then I wouldn’t have quit.’”

“We get a lot of feedback about students enjoying playing for others – in school programs, retirement homes, for family and friends, etcetera,” she added.

Mickey DeCock’s son, Matt, is a Simply Music Student and has taken lessons from Richards for three years.

“The best part is that he LIKES to play – for himself and others,” she said. “I was trained in the ‘old school’ piano method, so this has been very interesting for me. Our other kids were turned off by traditional lessons so I wanted to try something different this time. What a fabulous surprise, and it just keeps getting better.”

Brenda Wessel’s daughter has taken lessons with Richards for more than five years, and her son also takes lessons from Richards. She said she wanted to try something different from traditional piano lessons.

“We wanted something that would get her into playing the piano right away without having to go through all the boring scales and trying to read music before she even knew what they sounded like,” said Wessel. “We found Simply Music on the Internet and were very excited when we found out how these lessons worked.”

Richards recommends Simply Music for anyone ages six to 106.

“The organization is also releasing this year a new program for four- to six-year-olds, which we will offer at Keys to Harmony,” she said.

“We offer lessons Monday through Saturday at all times,” said Richards. “We also recently began offering guitar lessons, which is unrelated to the Simply Music program.”

Richards said there are about 15 Simply Music teachers in Omaha and 25 in Nebraska. There are currently about 120 students at Keys to Harmony, ranging in age from five to 84. Tuition is currently \$90/month for weekly lessons.

Those who are interested in learning more can contact Keys to Harmony at 402-502-7572 or visit www.keystoharmony.com.

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