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# Mr. Music's Amazing Grace

DAWN RUTH



It is the last day of classes at McMain Secondary School and Clyde Lawrence, Orleans Parish's Middle School Teacher of the Year, sits at his desk and sings. Head thrown back, eyes closed, he sings "Amazing Grace," without accompaniment. A dozen students listen without surprise. After all, singing is life itself to Lawrence. The very core of his being is so packaged by musical notes that he was nicknamed "Mr. Music" by a friend years ago.

He was never one of those youngsters whose idea of the future changed with the seasons. His calling came when he was barely out of diapers. By 4 years old, Lawrence had sung his first solo with the Nazarene Missionary Baptist Church choir, still one of his primary locations for song. "I sang 'Let Jesus Fix It for You.' I remember it like it was yesterday," Lawrence says of his 1967 debut.

Now, 41 years later, spiritual music is still his favorite material and he uses his voice and his time to inspire others. Like many local musical geniuses, he shares his talent with New Orleans students, helping keep the city's musical heritage alive.

His passion is indeed alive in his students. Even on the last day of class, while his ninth graders are waiting for the bell that releases them for summer's recreation, they gather in a tight lineup near a piano. They aren't playing it; they're clinging to it. One student's teenage angst shows in the way he sits apart and draws a hood around his head on a warm day. But when Lawrence calls them to perform, the boy rises instantly and lines up with the rest. Lawrence instructs them to sing "Lift Every Voice and Sing," and they do, singing loud and clear and in perfect unity, expressions bright with the joy of their joined voices.

Even the hooded boy's angst disappears. Standing center with the tall male tenors, flanked by the female tenors and sopranos, his eyes never leave Lawrence's. In song, he's connected, a team player, interested. His change of attitude is so pronounced, it supports many a principal's belief that extracurricular activities, such as choir, are as important as English, math and science because they keep some students in class long after they have reached the age of self-determination.

After their song has ended, Lawrence releases the students to their idleness. "My little babies," he says of this group of beginners. "I'm very proud of them." The affection is mutual.

"He's the best," says Ekebnta Okorn, vice president of the choir. She points at the blackboard where she has written the same sentiment in chalk. "My voice has improved. My musicianship has improved, all thanks to him."

Unmarried, he channels all of his passion into his work. He treats his students as if they were his children, loving one moment and stern the next. He travels the halls casting about warm smiles to all until he sees an infraction that deserves comment. "Do you want to keep that phone?" he says to a girl he spies with a cell phone clamped to her ear. "What's wrong with your ears?" he asks another girl wearing yellow earrings triple the allowable size of a quarter. When he yells, "Stop running!" his classically trained baritone voice could be heard down Claiborne Avenue during rush hour if the windows were open.

But mostly he's a teddy bear of a man, huggable and comforting. His former McDonogh 35 High School music teacher, Patricia Sallier-Seals, says his natural kindness draws students to him, where they feel safe enough to perform. McMain principal Bridgette B. Frick says he's a calming influence. He sang a verse of "Believe in Yourself" over the P.A. system during state LEAP testing to help relieve student anxiety.