

The Gift of Music Together: Rachel Howe and Craig Van Ness

When Rachel Howe began classes at Willamette River Music Together near Portland, Oregon, in the spring of 2007 with one-year-old Marisa, she was apprehensive. She felt self-conscious: she didn't think she was a good singer and she wondered whether the other moms and dads would judge her. And dancing with scarves? Uh-oh!

Despite Rachel's hesitancy, she decided to "hang in there" for Marisa's sake. After all, her daughter was having fun, so why not? Little did Rachel know that her connection to Music Together would become an integral part of her life with Marisa, and also with her daughter Eva, now age five. In fact, Rachel's experience with Music Together affected her so deeply and so personally that she sat down and crafted a letter for her teacher, Craig Van Ness, prior to the start of the current spring semester—her last classes with Eva, after six years in the program.

"As I enroll in our final term of Music Together, it feels a little like the closing of a chapter of my life," wrote Rachel. "You helped me see that my enthusiasm and enjoyment would influence Marisa's experience. I found a way to let go of my insecurity and just go for it. Sing. Dance. Have fun with my daughter. And the more I did these things, the less it became a conscious effort to do so. After a while, I started noticing musical changes in myself . . . I used to repeat the tonal patterns on the CD until I could do them—and they really did get easier over time (though, the pattern after "Hippity, Happity, Hoppity" nearly did me in!). I would be singing with Marisa in the car and suddenly realize that I was on key. In a time when my life was all about my little girl and taking care of her, Music Together became a vehicle for my own personal growth. What a gift."



Reading those words was a gift for Craig, too. As a Music Together teacher, Craig encourages families to make music a part of their lives, whether they are in class, or at home, or at the beach. He understands that many moms and dads come to class having very little experience being active music-makers. He knows how difficult it can be for someone like Rachel to put doubt and inhibition aside and jump, dance, and sing in a room full of adults and children. To know that Music Together had so deeply affected Rachel was inspiring and gratifying to Craig. But her letter of thanks resonated even further with him; for, just like Rachel, Craig also feels deeply indebted to Music Together for personal and musical growth. It was a gift that had changed his life, too.

For fifteen years prior to teaching Music Together, Craig worked as a mortgage banker. In his younger days, he had sung in choirs and loved musical theater, but his father was adamantly opposed to him pursuing a music career. So Craig joined the Navy instead and, when he got out, settled into banking. But in 1999, Craig realized how happy

it made him to sing with his nephew, and this led to his discovery of Music Together. While observing his first classes at the teacher training, everything changed. "Bells, whistles, my heart exploded, and my soul sang," he explains, "Suddenly, I realized what [Music Together] is all about. It's not just about teaching music and getting adults to interact and be musical. It is about creating a space large enough for a child's soul to sing, dance, play, explore, imagine, and create. I knew then, this was something I wanted to do. THIS makes a difference."



When Rachel first started taking classes, she had no idea who Craig was or what he'd experienced before teaching Music Together.

She simply knew that she'd found a place where she could delight in making music with her daughters. Rachel recalls galloping around the circle to "Trot Old Joe," holding both my babies close for cuddle time, watching the girls dance in the circle together, having the time of their lives. And when Eva was fussy in the late afternoons, she would sing her "Great Big Stars."

As their teacher, Craig was an instrumental part of the family's musical growth. Through their six years of singing, dancing, and being silly together, Craig and Rachel developed a lasting friendship—a friendship centered on the joy of music-making. Just recently, as Rachel was driving to class with Eva, her daughter said to her: "Mommy, I'm going to be done with Teacher Craig's class at the end of the school year. Will you miss class?" When Rachel responded that she most certainly would, Eva thought about it for a minute and told her mom, "I think if you asked Teacher Craig nicely, he'd still let you come."

For Rachel, Marisa, and Eva, this final semester of Music Together means the end of weekly classes with Craig, but it is certainly not the end of music-making for the Howe family. The depth of the musical foundation that Rachel and her daughters gleaned from the songs and activities they learned is an indelible part of their lives now.

"One consolation for me is knowing that, thanks to these years of Music Together, the girls and I will continue to share musical moments," writes Rachel, at the conclusion of her thank-you letter. "Marisa's piano teachers are always commenting on her natural musical ability, how she can 'feel' the beat so well for her age. I picture myself patting the beat to 'hello, everybody' on her little back years ago and just smile. Eva is so excited to begin piano lessons this summer, and I know her growth will continue as well. Thank you, Craig, for making so many of the memories that I will carry in my heart forever."

—Kate Battenfeld, *Music Together* contributing writer

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