



Students recording in the studio. Photo courtesy of Closer Together

From Harvard to the Moon, By Way of Lame Deer

By Eric Heidle

In retrospect, February 2020 doesn't seem like the ideal time to launch an ambitious arts program in one of Montana's more remote school districts. But the Closer Together project not only survived its beginning just weeks before the coronavirus lockdown began, it's since managed to thrive. And this lively, multidisciplinary exploration of the arts isn't just succeeding; it's literally shooting for the moon.

Even the program's beginning was audacious: a performance by Lame Deer High School students on stage at Harvard University with Kojiro "Ko" Umezaki, an internationally recognized master of the shakuhachi—a traditional style of Japanese bamboo flute. Umezaki is a participant in Silkroad, a 25-year-old organization founded by cellist Yo-Yo Ma and dedicated to creating cultural connections through music and the possibilities of what can happen "when strangers meet." (Umezaki himself comes from multiple cultural backgrounds, born to a Japanese father and Danish mother.)

Beginning with Japanese calligraphy made by Lame Deer students and translated into musical notes, the collaboration developed a melody which in turn blossomed into music. When strangers met in Montana, what happened might best be described as magic.

It's just one example of the vision for Closer Together/Moheh Stestove, overseen at the school by teacher Susan Wolfe and supported by a much larger community of people in the arts. Susan speaks about "light-bulb" moments. "For my students, if I can get to them quickly, the chance of success is greater." In a small, rural district, providing sustained, engaging arts instruction is critical to gaining and holding students' interest, and collaborations such as the one with Umezaki are typical of the ongoing work Susan has in mind.

Closer Together is also about meeting students where they are. Another project currently underway is happening in partnership with Nike, in which the kids are designing basketball shoes using paper and clay and other unusual materials. It's a means of expression centered around a hugely important fashion and cultural touchstone, and one which also involves a host of ideas: product development, design, prototyping, aesthetic and functional considerations, and the unquantifiable element of style.

It's also an example of bringing diverse artistic skills to bear. Closer Together has used nearly every medium it can get its hands on in order to spark students' imaginations. Susan says that classes have incorporated poetry, cooking, photography, music and other art forms into the group's projects. One of those musical endeavors is now preparing, in coordination with MSU's computer science program, to hop a ride aboard an upcoming NASA Artemis mission to the moon. It'll be part of a collection of recordings sent to our nearest neighbor in the solar system, in the vein of the famous "golden records" flown aboard NASA's Voyager missions in the 1970s.

Closer to home but still a fair jaunt from Lame Deer, Susan and four of her students

closer|together

kash spang|jennifer thompson|lori taylor|kathy fletcher
 michael weaselbear|nan parsons|thomas shoulderblade
 hadon standingwater|thomas two moons|carrie hultberg
 xavier yellow hawk|keban yellowrobe|ambrose seminole
 markell little coyote|theresa williamson|jalon whitedirt
 sage braidedhair|amelio blackhorse|martin braidedhair
 herman weaselbear|journey emerson|ernest littlemouth
 juanita littlebird|majenrielle wallowing|ryleigh dupris
 cheyenne hiwalker|micalah rollingbull|gretchen minton
 island little coyote|trishelie sandcrane|justin littlebird
 marcy cobell|maria spang|kevin brustuen|claudia boddy
 vincent hurtig|ramiah white|brock lameres|susan miller
 sheyanaa kalline|levi elkshouder|stan parker|scott gion
 easton hogan|pat whitedirt|shebly fisher|mahala vetsch
 saatesa rowland|lillianna sandcrane|paradise killsnight
 cristina pato|sandeep das|shaw pong lin|liz keller-trigg
 paris mclean|peter tofton|shandin kalline|jenna sanders
 joseph gramley|susan wolfe|kojiro umezaki|kaleb mason
 larry bixby|gabe strange owl|summer vetsch|sam haugen
 burton tallwhiteman|seidel standing elk|andrea stehic
 davinia osite|marlin spotted elk|skylar moore|betty gion
 tania medicine top|cedar rose lonohear|nat'ista clubfoot
 anno hultberg|adam jahiel|wayde big buffalo|alison legg
 zack harrus|baylee small|chayli kingfisher|harvey brady
 preston littlemouth|atalna buffalo spirit|loren seminole
 destind marquez|brad constantine|anjelica killsnight
 kayland limpygia mcmakin|cory clubfoote|joaquin bixby
 palani bearghost|pat whitedirt|monica grable|gil stober
 courtney small|acosia red elk|todd adams|jonathan riley
 dylan small|ben pease|asia two moons|philip spotted elk
 ethan emerson|deb glass|lillian harrus|raymond rowland
 nathan friesz|tami haaland|kilee small|irone spotted elk
 margie garcia|koda hiwalker|natalie parker|byron woods
 april jones|bernie bahr|kevin asselin|kitty medicine bull
 merlin killsnight|patti brady|savannah ryan|sherry foote

moheh|stestove

recently traveled to Los Angeles to continue work on the musical composition they began here with Ko Umezaki. They spent time in the studio recording vocals and shooting a music video with Billings-area filmmaker Pete Tolton. It's part of Susan's approach to making a difference by keeping guest artists involved with her students through sustained learning. "They can't just come once and disappear." Working with artists like Umezaki over time helps build students' trust and reinforces their own self-worth. This sense of prolonged artistic accomplishment isn't something that can happen in a single afternoon session.

If all of the above has you eager to see and hear the results of that sustained effort, you're very much in luck. In partnership with the Montana Artists Refuge gallery, Closer Together will be mounting an exhibition of the program's work this spring. An opening for the show will be held at the gallery on May 7 in the tiny town of Basin, between Butte and Helena; students and artists including Ko Umezaki will be on hand to celebrate a variety of the work produced so far. The intimate, rustic setting of the Artists Refuge space is perfectly in keeping with Closer Together's vision: sharing art and culture where it happens in unexpected and personal settings.

Closer Together has benefitted from many sources: from collaborations with artists like Ko, from the support of dozens of arts-related individuals and organizations, from funding and grants (including an Artists In Schools and Communities grant from the Montana Arts Council), and from the hard work of the school's teachers and staff. Most of all, though, the program's success is the result of the imagination sparked in the students themselves as they find and share their own artistic voices. **And we can't help but love that—to the moon and back.**