



¡Mariachi!

By Ruben Newell

If you pull out a yearbook from the 1960s and look up the band section, what will you see? A marching band, a concert band, small groups, and maybe a stage band? Take out a yearbook from the 1980s and you will probably see the same thing, except the stage band has likely changed its name to “jazz band.” What about your 2011-2012 yearbook? Still a marching band, a concert band, and jazz band? That’s how the yearbooks look at Denison High School. The problem is that while the students have changed dramatically in Denison over the last 50 years, the instrumental music program has been made of the same three major components: concert band, marching band, jazz band. When the 2012-2013 yearbook comes out, something will have changed. There will be marching band, concert band, jazz band, and mariachi.

What do you know about mariachi? Maybe I should ask that in a different way: what do you think you know about mariachi? If you are like I was two years ago, you think you know what mariachi is. If you are also like I was two years ago, you

are probably wrong. Over the last two years, I have learned that I didn’t know anything about mariachi. I learned that mariachi is a very passionate genre of music. I learned that the musicians that make up these mariachis are outstanding musicians with a wealth of knowledge about theory and technique. I learned that the top musicians in mariachi are almost all classically trained, and some hold degrees in composition or performance from major schools of music. I also learned that there was a population of our student body with a cultural connection to mariachi that I was not fully serving.

Denison, Iowa has changed considerably over the last 20 years. If you look up the 2010 census, you will find that Denison has a population of 8,300, and was one of the few rural Iowa cities to grow in population from 2000. That growth is centered around the 40 percent of our community that is of Hispanic decent. They are the families having more kids, which is why our school district of 2,200 students is 57 percent Hispanic. Our high school is around 775 students, and about half are Hispanic.

I know that Denison’s story is similar to the story of many towns in Iowa. The increasing diversity in



our student body is what makes our school special, but also provides challenges when planning curriculum and deciding what extra-curricular activities should be offered. When I first saw the ethnic breakdown of our district, the first thing I thought was, “Are we engaging as much of our student body as possible in music?” Thanks to a very strong middle school band program, directed by Patti Bekkerus, the instrumental music program in Denison serves a large portion of our student body. In fact, while the percentage of Hispanic students has risen in Denison, the instrumental music program involvement has not declined. It was not a question of if we could involve more students in music – rather could we involve more students deeper in music.

Discovery

In the fall of 2010, it came to my attention that there were a growing number of mariachi programs in the southern and western United States. The more I looked into them, the more I wanted one here in Denison. For six months, I looked up school districts on-line and contacted directors from around the country, but came to find that there were no school mariachi programs in Iowa. I knew I wanted to start a mariachi at DHS, but without a contact or colleague nearby to consult with, the outlook looked grim. Then, I received my 2011 Iowa Bandmasters Association Conference magazine. There, staring me in the face, was a session on starting a mariachi program.

That day in May at IBA changed the course of the instrumental music program in Denison. West Music, out of Coralville, had brought in Marcia Neel from Las Vegas to talk to us about what mariachi is and where we could go to get some training. That training was in June in Las Vegas, and West Music, along with Yamaha and Wenger, were offering some financial assistance to an Iowa director who wanted to start a program at their school. I left the clinic, found Patti and said, “We’re going to Vegas this summer.” We lined up a meeting with our superintendent as soon as we possibly could the next week and I braced myself to tell our

boss that we wanted to go to Las Vegas and learn how to start an entirely new program at Denison.

Our superintendent, Michael Pardun, was enthusiastic about the idea. He committed to sending us to Vegas for a week and buying the instruments we needed to get our mariachi program started in the fall of 2011. We had a meeting with our building principals, and it was all given a green light. Just like that, in the span of a couple months, we went from a dead end to a new program.

Patti and I spent a week in Las Vegas in late June, 2011, meeting some outstanding music educators and learning how to play new instruments (as well as a much-needed refresher from our college string methods class). We learned about the history of mariachi and worked with other band and orchestra directors who were also trying to start mariachi programs in their schools. During that week, our vision for a mariachi program was clarified and we started forming our plan for getting our program off the ground. When we returned to Denison, we had another meeting with our superintendent, and

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the following week, all of our new instruments were ordered.

Implementation

In September, we decided to start our first mariachi group with members of the eighth-grade band. We took a period to give the eighth-grade band a presentation about mariachi, followed by a short survey from each student concerning their interest in being in this type of ensemble. We had to limit the number of students based on the number of instruments we had. By the middle of September, violin and guitar lessons had started. For a few months, the violins and guitars learned in sepa-



Jocelyn Moran and Jessica Cantu sing “De Colores” at the March, 2012 debut of Mariachi Picoso.

rate classes, twice a week for 30 minutes. Out of the guitar class, we chose two students who were excelling to make the switch to vihuela (a smaller, five string guitar) and guitarron (the bass instrument of the mariachi). Eventually, the flutes and trumpets were added to the guitar class.

Since we were using the eighth-grade band members for our first mariachi, we did not need to start trumpets or flutes. For the guitars and violins, we used the *Simplemente Mariachi* beginner method. When the violins

reached lesson 16, they had the tools to play though the first full arrangement, “De Colores.” At that point the entire mariachi was put together to start rehearsing for our first performance. The group rehearsed twice a week for 30 minutes.

By winter break, Denison Middle School had its first mariachi, and they had a name: Mariachi Picoso. The students picked it out themselves, because “picoso” means spicy, and they thought they were pretty spicy. Their debut performance was in late March, and Mariachi Picoso performed three songs. One of them featured a member’s father as a vocalist. The performance went well,

Mariachi Picoso (March, 2012).



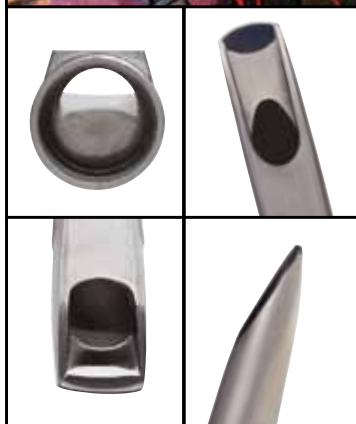
and it was well received by the community.

That first performance brought us some attention, including from a journalist in Des Moines, who came out to DMS to interview us and a few students. The result was an article in numerous papers across Iowa about what appeared to be Iowa's first school mariachi program. Thanks to that coverage, we spent the rest of the 2011-2012 school year learning three more songs out of the Libro Acompañante book series in preparation for two performances in Des Moines that June at educator conferences. Later in June, Patti and I returned to Las Vegas to get level two training and brought back plans for expansion of our mariachi program into the high school.

Today

Today, as I write this, Denison Community Schools has two mariachis – one at the middle school and one at the high school. It involves about 50 students: a number that is limited by the number of instruments the school owns. The school has purchased three vihuelas, two guitarrones, fifteen guitars, and fifteen violins. We also have trumpet and flute players in both groups, as well as a few violin and guitar players who own their own instruments. Our middle school group is made up of a new batch of eighth-grade band members, and have just started violin and guitar classes. Our high school group, which is primarily made up of our first group of eighth-graders from last year, has chosen a name: Mariachi Reyes del Oeste (“kings of the west”). Since our school mascot is the monarchs and we are in western Iowa, the name seemed to fit! Mariachi Reyes del Oeste just finished presenting at the IMEA (Iowa Music Educator Association) conference this past November, thanks to Robin Walenta at West Music and Marcia Neel from Music Ed Consultants in Las Vegas. They had the chance to perform with Maestro Jose Hernandez, who is one of the most well-known mariachi leaders/musicians/composers/arrangers in the world. Maestro Hernandez also worked with the mariachi students – an emotional, musical experience that those students will never forget.

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As you look at your band program in your school, ask yourself if you are reaching the students with the same three major components that have been around for generations. If you are, then great, but maybe there's something else out there that could enhance the music education of your students. Maybe a mariachi program doesn't fit your school's population. Is there something else that would fit better? For Denison, it was mariachi, and I know there are directors out there reading this that think a mariachi program would fit into their school, too. If so, give Patti or I a call and we will tell you all about how we got the courage to follow through with this program, and you can, too. In spring of 2011, when Marcia Neel told me to stop worrying about it and just do it, she said that it would be a great addition to the band program and that it would be well-received by everyone. She was right.

If you can't tell, I am excited about our mariachi program. Some of the most rewarding educational experiences I have had have come over the last two years as a part of our mariachi program. Is it scary starting something new? Yes – but it is so rewarding. Have I questioned if we were doing the right thing? At the beginning I did, but I clearly remember the day when those doubts were put to rest. Right after we got the first group together for the first time after sectional rehearsals, I had them get out a piece called "Duermense." About two measures into the song, one of the violin players stopped, perked up and said, "My mom used to sing this to me at bed time." At that moment, I knew we had something special – we had found a way to connect our instrumental music program more intimately with a large part of our student body. We had made a personal connection with them through music. In the end, that's what really matters.



Ruben Newell, Eric Ramirez, and Patti Bekkerus.

Patti Bekkerus and Ruben Newell are the band directors for Denison Community Schools. Mr. Newell is in his 13th year teaching instrumental music, including 4 years in Denison. His current teaching duties include the Denison High School Concert Band, two jazz bands, pep band, the Monarch Marching Band, mariachi, and all 9-12 lessons. He is currently the webmaster of the Southwest Iowa Bandmasters Association.

Mrs. Bekkerus has been teaching instrumental music for 26 years, including 19 years in Denison. Her current teaching duties include 6th grade band, 7th grade band, 8th grade band, DMS Jazz Band, Middle School Marching Band, mariachi and 6-8 lessons. She is currently the middle school honor band

chair for southwest Iowa, as well as Past-President of the Southwest Iowa Bandmasters Association.

Visit Denison's mariachi program online at www.MonarchBand.org, and on Facebook: www.facebook.com/mariachiReyesDelOeste/.

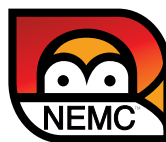
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Natalie - Future band director

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