



GOOSE CREEK

CONSOLIDATED INDEPENDENT SCHOOL DISTRICT

Lions Club donates keyboard to Lamar's musical prodigy

The human mind is mystifying in its capacity to accommodate both disability and genius in the same person.

Take the case of Lamar Elementary School student Mikkelle Rodriguez.

Mikkelle, 10, is autistic, has cerebral palsy and is blind, though she has slight sight in one eye. And yet she has a talent few of us can imagine.

Mikkelle can listen to an unfamiliar piece of music and can replay it — on any number of instruments — note for note.

"Playing music is both her uncommon talent and salvation," said her mother, Kimberly Stephens.

Mikkelle's uncanny ability recently attracted the attention of the Lions Club of Baytown.

The Lions Club of Baytown partners with Goose Creek CISD's Visual Impairment teachers to provide glasses for children. Yet, after speaking to Mikkelle's VI teacher Gayle Lyon, they wanted to do something different.

Soon afterward, Lions Club President Sam Thomas and other members of the civic group presented Mikkelle with an electronic keyboard.

After the presentation, Mikkelle studied the keys, feeling up and down the unfamiliar keyboard. After a couple of minutes, she began to play, "You Are My Sunshine" flawlessly.

"She is truly amazing," said life skills teacher Alicia Locke.

In reality, she is even more amazing than that.

"You are My Sunshine" was the first song she played back perfectly on a piano — without any lessons.

Mikkelle's mother has sung, "You Are My Sunshine" to her since she was born.

"For her birthday a couple of years ago I bought her a piano. I was singing the song to her while giving her a bath and as soon as she got out of the bath tub she went straight to the piano and played it perfectly not once missing a note or a beat," Stephens said. "It was beautiful and brought tears to my eyes and a huge smile to my face. I began to sing other songs to her, and she was able to play them back to me on the piano just as perfectly."

Mikkelle's talent is not limited to a piano or keyboard. She also plays the drums, xylophone, and guitar — no prior lessons on any of them either.

Furthermore, Mikkelle's mother gave her a radio and Mikkelle figured out how to tune in stations and control the volume in seconds. She routinely sings songs from the radio that she has instantly memorized, and now makes up her own songs.

Her favorite radio station is 94.5 The Buzz, Houston's alternative rock station, and is a big fan of deejay Rod Ryan.

Her teacher, Mrs. Locke, notes that before Mikkelle could play musical instruments, she sang every song she heard on the radio during the music period in class.



Goose Creek photo by Kasi Adcock

The Lions Club of Baytown recently donated a keyboard to Lamar Elementary student Mikkelle Rodriguez. In the back row, from left, are Lamar Principal Greg Lynd, Lions Club member LaNelle McKay, Lions Club President Sam Thomas, Lions Club members Helen Brandon and Carl Brandon, and visual impairment teacher Gayle Lyon. In front are Mikkelle Rodriguez and life skills teacher Alicia Locke.

"Mikki also tapped or clapped elaborate beats. She had perfect pitch and repeated and even elaborated her own 'add ons' to popular music such as The Fugees 'Killing Me Softly,'" Locke said, adding that Mikkelle's favorite artists to imitate are Beyonce, Katy Perry, and Rihanna.

Mikkelle has been at Lamar Elementary for three years, something her mother credits greatly for her physical and mental progress.

"Mikkelle loves going to school. She is always asking to go back during the weekends," said Stephens. "She loves interacting with the other children, and she loves her teacher."

Mikkelle has come a long way since she was born at 24 weeks, weighing 13 ounces. She stayed in the NICU at Texas Children's Hospital for four and a half months.

Mikkelle did not walk until she was 5. She cannot run yet.

During her first years Mikkelle had several surgeries on her eyes because her retinas kept detaching.

The specialist at that time said that it would only get worse with time and that she wouldn't be able to see. Mikkelle's condition, however, has gotten better, and she is able to see colors and shapes.

Her ophthalmologists are now considering additional surgery to give her more sight, her mother said.

Mikkelle is working on drinking from a glass, eating regular food, and getting herself dressed. She has mastered her colors and counting.

Mikkelle speaks very well and has an impressive vocabulary given her condition. Mikkelle has been the only student that communicates with speech in the classroom for a few years.

Locke said when Mikkelle started school, she was happy only when there was music playing or there was singing.

"She cried a lot and loudly when music wasn't playing or when she wasn't allowed to pursue her own interests. As time has continued, she's mellowed and become more accustomed to following directions and the schedule of school," she said.

"I see Mikkelle playing more complex works later on. She's exposed to a variety of music in class as well as at home so I see with practice and opportunity her just getting more proficient," Locke said. "It will be her thing. It's her area of giftedness."

Locke has been Mikkelle's teacher for several years now and is a good friend of the family.

"Mikkelle absolutely adores her and talks about her all the time at home. Even outside of school several times Mrs. Locke has come to my house when I couldn't leave to bring me medicine for her or things that she needs," said Stephens.

"Mikkelle gets a perfect combination of education and love at Lamar with Mrs. Locke," said Stevens.

Since enrolling at Lamar, Stephens said, Mikkelle has grown in so many ways.

"She loves to spell, and she loves to learn. They have helped me teach her how to eat, how to walk (Mikkelle was in a wheelchair a couple of years ago), and other self-help skills," she said.

"Though we have a ways to go, they are always there to help guide us in the right direction, offering great support and educational information on resources."

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