

Steel Drum Band Gives Homeless Students a Musical Outlet

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Ted Williams became a voice for homeless adults after he was discovered in early January, but a group of current and former homeless teens in San Diego is giving them a beat -- in the form of a steel drum band called the [Steel Monarchs](#).

The troupe has been around since 1999 and is part of an after-school program offered at the [Monarch School](#), a K-12 public school established exclusively for homeless youth.

It's one of only three schools in the nation specifically established for homeless students and the only public school of its kind with a nonprofit partnership to supplement students' needs.



Courtesy Monarch School

The members of the Steel Monarchs are teens who are either homeless or formerly homeless, including, from left, Javier Ortiz, Elia Motu, Blade Phelps, instructor Robbie Hutchinson and Ahlufemi Young.

One of those needs is, apparently, a steel drum band, according to the band's instructor, Robbie Hutchinson.

"The Monarch School wanted to add a musical program, and Makeda Dread, who runs the World Beat Center here in San Diego, suggested steel drums would be a good idea and that her center had a couple," Hutchinson told AOL News.

Some people might think homeless kids would be better off learning more portable instruments like, say, the guitar or the harmonica, but Hutchinson says the steel drum is a better first instrument.

"With the steel pan, you can start teaching kids immediately," he said. "With a guitar, you have to master the fingerings and with a trumpet, you have to learn the mouthpiece."

The first group of kids not only had to learn to hit the drums with a mallet, but first, they had to use a sledgehammer.

"We actually had the kids help build drums out of 55-gallon containers," Hutchinson said. "We still have them here. They're actually bass drums."

Currently, there are five students in the band who perform in public at various events, such as weddings and corporate events, and even performing the national anthem at a San Diego Padres game.

In addition, there are five kids who are getting up to speed in hopes of joining the others.

All of them are either homeless or formerly homeless, such as Javier Ortiz, 13, who joined the Monarchs two years

ago.

"I didn't have a home for a whole year," he said. "Now I stay with friends."

Javier joined the group because he wanted to learn drums and, so far, it's been a great experience.

"I get to go to new places and meet new people, and learn new instruments," he said.

Since the musicians "age out" at some point, the repertoire is also in flux as well. Still, the song list usually includes steel drum staples like "Yellow Bird," "Jamaica Farewell" and "Pan in A Minor," as well as (slightly) more modern compositions like "My Cherie Amour" and "Return to Sender."

Hutchinson admits that because his students live transitory lives it can create some challenges, but not as much as you might think.

"All the kids have had homes before, so they know what's that like," he said. "The practices are held in the school courtyard -- which is our equivalent to a playground -- so that can be distracting to a 12-year-old. On the other hand, being in this band beats hanging out at a homeless shelter where there aren't that many things to do and there are a lot of rules they have to follow."

As such, Hutchinson says the kids are very motivated to learn. And some, like Elia Motu, 12, are motivated even before they are old enough to join.

"I've wanted to join since I was 10. The steel drums are nice and beautiful and the music sounds great," said Motu, who has since taken up the alto sax as well.

Motu was homeless for nine months and says that made being in the band worse.

"Some gigs were at night, and there was a 10 p.m. curfew where the lights are out," he said. "Now when I get home, I can still stay up and do homework."

Hutchinson also says he's learned from his 11 years as an instructor.

"Teaching the kids has improved my playing," he said. "I learned more about arranging and music theory."

The Steel Monarchs have earned a local rep and play regularly, but strictly for donations to the school. The musicians don't get salaries, but they get gift cards to places like Target to help them purchase the teenage essentials.

"Some of the kids spend them right away. Others save up for things like iPods," Hutchinson said.

There's also another perk: the fans.

"The kids get to go to places and meet people they might not otherwise," he said. "We recently did a show at the Organ Pavilion in Balboa Park in front of 2,000 people. After the show, they were rushed by people, both young and old. They didn't know how to deal with it."

As the Steel Monarchs' star rises, Hutchinson can't help but dream of the future.

"My first goal would be, of course, to get homes for these kids," he said. "I'd also like to get more kids involved so we can go out as a complete unit, with drums, bass and guitar. I'd also like to do a CD recording and help these kids learn more about music."