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Off to a good start: JOMP's new director ready for a harmonious JOMPATHON 2023

Richard Duckett January 27, 2023



Jennifer Griffin Gaul is the new executive director of the Joy of Music Program, or JOMP, in Worcester. Rick Cinclair/Telegram & Gazette

WORCESTER — There was harmony at the Joy of Music Program, 1 Gorham St., when Jennifer Griffin Gaul talked with the nonprofit community music school about possibly becoming its [executive director](#) [just](#) over a year ago.

Although Griffin Gaul was in China at the time, JOMP, as everyone refers to the [Joy of Music Program](#), zoomed right in.

JOMP founder and (at the time) director, Wendy Ardizzone, was planning a transition after more than 35 years. She and her husband, Rich Ardizzone, then JOMP associate director, wanted to step back and let a new executive director take charge while still being around to offer support.

Griffin Gaul was head of performing arts at Yew Chung International School in Shanghai, but had decided she wanted to return home to the United States where she had plenty of experience in arts administration and music. After interviews via Zoom from China, Griffin Gaul was offered the job.

"When we looked at her resume we knew she would be the one we wanted to talk to," Rich Ardizzone said. "And when we met her she was the only one we were interested in." All this on Zoom. "She was enthusiastically received by the faculty, staff and board," Rich Ardizzone said.

The harmony has continued now that Griffin Gaul is at JOMP in person as executive director. She arrived last July.

"I love JOMP. It's an authentic and unique organization," Griffin Gaul said. "It's really lovely what Wendy and Rich have created, so I feel very fortunate to be here."

The big event

Coming up, Griffin Gaul will preside for the first time over one of JOMP's biggest and most visible events of the year, the [annual JOMPATHON](#).

Over 140 students of all ages and abilities will perform all day Feb. 4 during JOMPATHON 2023 at JOMP's Joseph and Jordan Shapiro Concert Hall at 1 Gorham St. to raise money for the music school's financial aid program. For the first time there will be also an opening ceremony the evening before at 7 p.m. Feb. 3, including a reception and a concert by JOMP students and faculty (RSVP only).

This will be the 32nd JOMPATHON, and the first since 2020 to be held in person. In 2021 and 2022 the event was held virtually because of the pandemic (the 2020 JOMPATHON was in January of that year, before the pandemic took hold).

This may be Griffin Gaul's first JOMPATHON, but she's had experience overseeing musical marathons by young performers.

"It's really about getting the students in and giving them a good experience with an audience," she said.

The youngest performer at JOMPATHON 2023 on Feb. 4 is a five-year-old who has just started learning to play the violin. The performers will run from children to adults and beginners to advanced students. JOMPATHON has a fund-raising goal of \$30,000. 100% of the proceeds will go to need-based scholarships.

Students performing get family and friends to make pledges. People can come by and watch for free on Feb. 4, but donations to JOMP's financial aid program will be appreciated. For more information, go to jomp.org.

Rich Ardizzone will be the host of JOMPATHON, as he has been for many years. But he said he was a bit surprised to be asked to take the role this year, given the changes at JOMP. However, he didn't sound upset about it.

New roles

He and his wife have had different job titles at JOMP for the current 2022-23 academic year with Griffin Gaul as executive director.

Wendy Ardizzone is now vice president of donor and alumni relations and Rich Ardizzone is vice president of operations.

"Jenny chose 'vice president' because she wanted to define us as a team, but we're supporting Jennifer. She's the executive," Rich Ardizzone said.

Next academic year Wendy and Rich Ardizzone will go from full time positions to part time roles on "special assignments as designated by Jennifer and the board. A support system for Jennifer," Rich Ardizzone said.

All three are also on the JOMP teaching faculty. Griffin Gaul teaches piano and Music and Movement, Rich Ardizzone teaches trombone, world drums and jazz ensembles, and Wendy Ardizzone will continue to accompany students on the piano.

Wendy Ardizzone had previously said JOMP was created as a nonprofit music school that would belong to the community, and it was her hope that the school would endure beyond her tenure.

JOMP was founded in 1986 as a program of music and movement classes for preschoolers and grew into a regional school serving children, teens and adults of all levels of musical development. The school's mission is "to enrich lives and foster community through accessible music education and performance."

After many years at First Unitarian Church, a fire there in 2000 led to some relocation for the school. After a capital campaign it moved into its own facilities at 1 Gorham St. in 2002. The Joseph & Jordan Shapiro Concert Hall was dedicated in 2016.

Griffin Gaul is originally from Narragansett, Rhode Island, and holds a Master of Music in piano pedagogy and performance from the University of Texas at Austin. She was director of development and marketing for Turtle Bay Music School in New York City and then served as its executive director from 2005 to 2010.

Griffin Gaul's late husband, Scott Sherwood, was a professional jazz guitarist and composer. After he died of lymphoma, Griffin Gaul moved from New York City to serve as director of Dana Hall School of Music in Wellesley. A number of students at the school were from China, and Griffin Gaul was contacted about a new school opening in China, where she lived five years.

She had never been to Worcester when she accepted the JOMP job, although her mother had been a student at the Bancroft School for a year.

Now she is not nearly so far away from JOMP as she once was, living just a couple of streets away from the music school.

"I wanted to be able to walk to work," she said.

Griffin Gaul feels she walked into a good situation.

"I've had a long career and been in many positions at different levels. I came in not with any specific expectations. I liked the culture of the school. I know it was created from a very strong vision Wendy and Rich had," she said.

The two are "very much here," she said of their dedication and presence. As for Wendy and Rich Ardizzone becoming part time at JOMP, "knowing them part time is 40 hours a week not 60 hours a week," she joked.

"My goal was not to come in and make changes. I need to understand the culture and carry on the spirit of what they created."

Still, changes have and will be inevitable ranging from a new JOMP logo and website redesign to new programs and reaching out to new students and families.

Meanwhile, "I really like the staff a lot. They're great," Griffin Gaul said. And the quality of the faculty "is very high ... It's a community music school in the best sense. We have some really gifted students playing at very high levels."

Teaching in person

As for the community of Worcester, Griffin Gaul said of her new home, "I think Worcester's got a lot going for it. I like diversity in the community."

But while she was interviewed and hired through Zoom (something that is now more common than one might think these days, she said), Griffin Gaul said she is not a fan of the idea of teaching JOMP students via Zoom.

"I personally have very strong feelings about Zoom in certain ways," she said. "I don't think its for kids at all. It's convenient, but I don't think it's in their best interest."

She understands that during the pandemic music schools had to go online.

"At JOMP, Wendy and Rich were very cautious," she said.

Now, however, "What we have is largely in-person. The numbers have been coming back. In general we only use Zoom when we need make-ups or someone is stuck in a storm."

JOMP currently had about 430 to 440 students and a faculty just of under 40 teachers, Griffin Gaul said.

The numbers are down a bit from pre-pandemic but Griffin Gaul feels there would be more students if there were more faculty.

"It's hard to find faculty We've got a situation where more people are looking for lessons than we have faculty for. It's hard to find people right now. I don't know where they all went."

JOMP has re-opened on Saturdays having previously been closed that day for a while so the school is now open six days a week, Griffin Gaul said. A new program on Saturdays, JOMP START, is for babies, tots and kindergarten children and designed to build on musical growth with each stage of development.

Wendy Ardizzone said, "Its thrilling for me to watch Jenny embracing JOMP's mission as she puts her wonderful ideas into action for spreading and expanding outreach to more children."

Similarly, Rich Ardizzone said "It's going great. Very positive. Things are going very well."

Staff and faculty "are very happy with Jenny. People can see she knows what she's doing. We are getting new families signing up. There are a lot of good things going on," he said.

"We're (Wendy and Rich Ardizzone) just giving her the institutional knowledge she needs. As each event comes up, we share with her where everything is," he said.

And now the next one up is JOMPATHON on Feb. 4.

"If we can hit \$30,000 that would be brilliant," Griffin Gaul said.

With JOMPATHON benefitting JOMP's financial aid program, "We want to make sure music is available."

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