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Burncoat High violinist meets Asperger's challenges

By Melissa McKeon CORRESPONDENT



Burncoat High School senior James Alers performs in the Joy of Music Program's 25th Anniversary Spring Gala concert May 16 at Mechanics Hall. (T&G Staff/BETTY JENEWIN)

WORCESTER — For Burncoat High School senior James Alers, the road to studying violin at a music conservatory has always been as straight, but there have been some pretty substantial bumps.

From the moment he heard a violinist play in a group that performed at Jacob Hiatt Magnet School, Mr. Alers was hooked.

“He said he wanted a violin,” his mother, Jeannette Alers, said. “We suggested, Why don't you play the bongo drums or something. But the violin was calling to him. Then he got a box, cut it up and shaped it like a violin, put rubber bands on it and tried to play it. The funny thing was he was getting noise out of it.”

His parents gave in and bought him a violin.

“I played it a lot for awhile,” he recalled. “Then I started getting detached. I was getting bored.”

He was about to quit when he began Burncoat Middle School, where the music program is particularly strong. His parents encouraged him to continue and are now glad they did.

At Burncoat Middle and Burncoat High, Mr. Alers' participation in music classes and orchestra concerts eventually gave him confidence. He increased his repertoire, found mentors and teachers willing to help him and began to perform in concerts.

“I was more driven,” he said. “As time went on, I noticed myself getting better.”

He also had encouragement from his swift progress, his peers and those for whom he auditioned. He qualified for district orchestra and went from 29th chair in Grade 7 to principal chair in Grade 8. He also qualified as third chair in the state orchestra.

Mr. Alers' parents attribute much of their son's success to the teachers at Burncoat. Dani Rmoni, in particular, referred Mr. Alers to a music teacher and last year recommended that he apply to the New England Conservatory Preparatory School, where he received a scholarship.

Locally, he's performed, taught and taken lessons in the Joy of Music Program. Next fall, he will enter Longy School of Music of Bard College in Cambridge with a growing list of scholarships that acknowledge his talent and drive.

His father, Juan Alers, finds the success of his young musician son overwhelming. “I'm very proud to have a son who has this talent,” he said.

Though the Burncoat senior is a gifted musician, his story might be the same as that of many a young, talented violinist except for one challenge: Mr. Alers has Asperger's syndrome, one of the autism spectrum disorders.

Before that diagnosis, Ms. Alers recalls her son's difficulties in elementary school, and her fear that he would not succeed. In middle school, a diagnosis was reached, and so began a period of the family learning how to work with the school to cope with the challenge.

The Alers family found willing and helpful teachers on all fronts.

“I have to say that they've used every type of creative method to help him succeed, academically and music-wise,” his mother said.

Mr. and Ms. Alers say they've spent many hours conferring with teachers to understand Asperger's, which is characterized by the obsessive focus they had observed as well as difficulties with social interaction and empathy. It's an education many folks need.

“They're brilliant kids,” Ms. Alers said. “James knows the molecular structure of a cell but took a long time to tie his shoe.”

“Kids with Asperger's think differently, so you have to teach them differently,” Mr. Rimoni said.

Teachers also spent a great deal of time planning with the Alerses how James could best succeed. Everyone involved in his education said it was fortunate he was at Burncoat with its emphasis on fine arts programs.

“Some students learn about the world through the arts, and he's one of those kids,” said teacher Deborah Cole.

Because Asperger's is characterized by an almost obsessive interest in subjects, Mr. Alers was also fortunate to attend a school where that interest could be fed with advanced classes and plenty of music mentors such as Mr. Rimoni and Ms. Cole.

“I don't even want to think about what life would be like for James (without the music program),” Ms. Cole said.

She recalled, however, that as Mr. Alers progressed with the violin, he still had difficulty with the other

academics. He could continue to make progress with his music, however, if he learned to make progress with his other academics.

And Mr. Rimoni knew it was crucial for Mr. Alers to make academic progress in order to further his music education at the high level he seemed destined for.

All that effort, however, would have been for naught if it hadn't been for Mr. Alers' passion for music.

"I'm so enticed by all this music," he said of the stacks of classical scores near him.

While he finds himself playing what performance demands, his own preferences are music from the Romantic period.

"I need something that I can create my own interpretation," he said.

While other students may need encouragement to practice, Mr. Alers' parents sometimes insist that he put down his violin so he can eat, sleep or study other subjects.

"I forget everything when I'm practicing," he said.

Mr. Alers is realistic about the difficulties that Asperger's presents. His pre-performance anxiety is difficult to manage, and he is overly critical of his own performance, making him practice constantly. Before he begins Longy this fall, he'll work with a specialist to help with overcoming some of the daily challenges that he'll face.

But he's matured to a positive view of something others might view as negative.

"I accept it, and I actually am grateful. It helps me focus on something I take to heart," Mr. Alers said.

He's also grateful to the Burncoat teachers and mentors who've shown him the path he hopes will lead to establishing his own program, similar to the Joy of Music Program where he is now concertmaster, that can give opportunities to other rising young musicians regardless of their ability to pay.

"I think of it as my own long-term pay-it-back," he said.