

Can You Hear the People Sing?

By Kim L. Freedman, Head of School at New Garden Friends School



When children are small, we fill their worlds with music and singing, but as they get older, particularly in schools, there is a tendency to focus

our attention on formalized music instruction and forgo informal opportunities for singing. At Quaker schools, we still sing. In addition to music lessons, ensemble, and musical theater, pre-K through 12th-grade students, faculty, and staff have a tradition of singing together. Why?

One of my favorite psychologists, Richard Levitan, studies music and neuroscience at McGill University in Montreal. There is ample research to support his claim that regardless of preferences, music is experienced similarly across research participants. Music makes people feel good, it releases dopamine, “the happy hormone”. Levitan asserts that bonds a group. He says, “There’s this unifying force that comes from the music, and we don’t get that from other things.”

At New Garden Friends School, a preschool – 12th grade Quaker school in Greensboro, we take all of our obligations to students seriously. We encourage their curiosity and guide them as they learn to consider new ideas, to reason, to calculate, to develop hypotheses and to test them. In all kinds of ways, we endeavor to provide opportunities for



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our students to share their unique gifts and we share ours with them. When our students grow and move on, we hope they will take with them a life-long excitement for inquiry and for trying new things. By providing them years of service opportunities, our expectation is that they will find a way to give to their communities. Most of all we hope they will always remember that they were a valued and respected part of a community at New Garden Friends School.

This year at Grandfriends Day I grinned as I watched a number of our high school seniors at Meeting for Worship (a Quaker service); some were doing the hand motions of the songs they had learned as children; they were unembarrassed, they laughed as more and more joined in. When they head off to college next fall,



I’m betting they’ll forget how we prodded them to change another variable on that experiment or whether they got an A on an exam, or wrote the perfect term paper. Years from now, their diplomas may be in a box in the attic, but I’m pretty sure that certain tunes will transport them back to the sense of community they felt while singing together, to NGFS, a place where they felt known, supported, and cared for.

At the closing of this special day, some of our young violinists shared a selection of music. Without prompting, our Grandfriends joined in and sang the last verses of “My Bonnie Lies Over the Ocean”. Then they boisterously called out for a reprise. The singing was spontaneous, unhurried and joyful. For me it was a musical connection that raised up what a sense of community provides for our students. It confirmed for me the importance of providing the time and space in their lives for spontaneity, traditions, community, and song. **WJ**



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From preschool through grade 12, NGFS offers an innovative journey that prepares boys and girls not just for the school years ahead, but for the rest of their lives.

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