

Learning to sing the blues

Musician gives history lesson to Peoria students

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Guitarist Michael Herman spent the day at Glen Oak Primary giving the kids hands-on experience by showing them how to play and make their own instruments. Herman also discussed blues music and its cultural influence.

PEORIA - Before this week, most of the students at Glen Oak Primary hadn't been in a music class all school year.

That changed Monday when blues musician Michael "Hawkeye" Herman performed and built instruments with about 350 students in kindergarten through second grade.

Herman, who lives in Oregon, has traveled to schools across the country for the past 30 years to introduce students to blues music. He said he spent his 20s learning from some of pioneers of blues, including Lightning Hopkins, Son House and Bukka White, who was B.B. King's cousin.

"They passed that tradition on to me, and it's my job to pass that along to young children," Herman said.

A lot of youngsters he has met have gone on to pursue careers in music.

In the morning, Herman discussed the history of blues music with students and gave a live performance. He emphasized how most contemporary music has its roots in blues.

He spent the afternoon in the gymnasium teaching the students how to make guitars, tambourines, maracas and drums.

For Herman, coming to the area was also a chance for him to return to his own roots. He grew up in the Quad Cities and used to occasionally visit Peoria.

Like many of the schools he visits, not all of Glen Oak Primary students previously had attended a music class. "In some schools, my program is the only exposure they'll get," Herman said.

Martha Graves, a teacher at Glen Oak Primary, said the school hasn't been able to hold music classes this year because a part-time music instructor could not be found.

Stacey Shangraw, director of marketing and public relations for District 150, said all schools in the district still have some type of music opportunity for students. Glen Oak students in third through fifth grades can participate in orchestra.

"A lot of kids don't have access to instruments, and this is a way to show them how to take everyday items and make instruments," said Lesley Matuszak, director of the Boys and Girls Clubs of Greater Peoria, which was the primary sponsor for the event along with Howard & Howard attorneys.

Dominick Swanson, 7, said he didn't know much about music before Monday. After making a maraca out of a water bottle and corn kernels, he said he now plans to eventually make a guitar.

Kaleigh Watson, 5, pounded on her tambourine as she sang "Twinkle Twinkle Little Star" with her friends.

For more experienced students like Janayja Rutherford, 8, it was an opportunity to learn about new instruments.

"I learned more about rock 'n' roll and how it started," she said.

Rutherford slowly threaded a green ribbon into a hole in an aluminum foil pan to make a tambourine.

Once they had finished making their instruments, Herman led them in a song that left everyone's ears ringing.

video link:

<http://pjstar.mycapture.com/mycapture/folder.asp?event=453229>

photos:

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