

Drum teacher gets special student into rhythm of life

By Eric Deggans

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In nearly 20 years as a drum teacher and performer, Joe Nevolo thought he'd seen every kind of musical situation at least a couple of times. Then he got a call from Maureen Maimone.

On the surface to sounded simple enough; her 9 year-old son, J.C., loved music and wanted to take drum lessons. But J.C. – who was born with Down Syndrome – had a tough time mustering the coordination and concentration required to play a drum set, and his math skills would likely never progress to the point where he could read music.

Maimone had already gone through three other music teachers and wasn't optimistic about approaching a fourth. But Nevolo, who had been searching for ways to spice up his teaching techniques, had an answer.

Placing cardboard numbers and symbols on the various parts of the drum set, he was able to tell J.C. where to hit without using complicated percussion notation. And, using a laser pen to shine a light on different parts of the drum kit, he provided a fun incentive for his student to play through lessons.



Joe Nevolo, of the Big Beat Music Studio in Neptune, uses numbers and shapes to help 9 year-old J.C. Maimone, who suffers from Down Syndrome, learn how to play drums.

Since first bringing J.C. to Nevolo's Big Beatdrum studio months ago, Maimone said she's watched her son's eye/hand coordination increase, along with his ability to concentrate.

"There's all these side benefits that I never thought of," she said. "Indirectly, I would say it's helped with his reading skills ...hopefully, from holding the drumsticks, it might help his motor skills for handwriting."

For Nevolo, a longtime player who has been smacking the skins

since he was 7 years old, his work with J.C. was a natural extensions of efforts to make drum lessons more fun for beginners of all kinds. Besides the special attachments, he keeps a small array of stage lighting in his Neptune teaching space (including a black light and strobes), using a videotape camera to capture a students playing form.

Such techniques likely wouldn't sit well with purists, who might accuse him of spoiling students. But Nevolo – himself a veteran of

gigs with Kiss Guitarist Bruce Kulick, Pat Travers and Mahogany Rush – hopes to foster a love for the instrument while providing the knowledge to play better.

"For young kids, especially, you want to give them a fun environment before you start crunching fractions," he said. "There's a lot stronger rapport and it makes teaching the harder stuff a lot easier."

In J.C.'s case, it means the child – whom will enter third grade at Ocean Township School this fall – can have an outlet for his musical tendencies and a chance to to realize his current career goal: to be an orchestra conductor.

"Because of his cognitive problems, he gets the name so the drums confused sometimes and has a really short attention span...so we thought this couldn't be done," his mothers said.

"he's very proud of himself that he can take music lessons just like any other kid, and that's what 's important," she added. "I'm not expecting him to be Ringo Starr, we just want him to enjoy all the other opportunities anyone else has."