

THE HEALING POWER OF THE PICCOLO: MEET CINDY ELLIS, A PACIFIC SYMPHONY PIONEER

Flutist Cindy Ellis is used to being one of the first — she was one of the youngest members of the orchestra when it first started, one of the first musicians to teach in our Class Act program providing multi-year musical curricula for elementary schools and now is the first to participate in a pilot Heartstrings project at Children’s Hospital of Orange County (CHOC).

“I attribute it to the power of my instrument,” says the lithe 40-something blonde. “You cannot be shy playing the piccolo, playing something that loud requires either total naiveté or total confidence!”

One of her first firsts was as the musician/teacher for Class Act at the St. Joseph School in Santa Ana in the first year of the Class Act program 18 years ago.

“We had just played excerpts of Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony for a kindergarten class and when asked how it made them feel, a young girl stood up and said quite loudly, ‘It makes me feel angry.’ The school’s teachers started scurrying around, the principal came flying in, and all the other kids started buzzing. Kelly [Ruggirello]* and I thought it was a little unusual, but it wasn’t until later that we learned it was the first time this autistic child had ever spoken in class. Something in the music unlocked a place inside for her and made it safe to talk.”

Cindy cites that moment as a pivotal one in her life as a musician and a teacher. “As an artist, I don’t get a lot of direct feedback. Sure the audience gives you love, but it’s rare that you get real evidence of the impact. On that day, the music gave that child a key. From that point forward I made the shift as a teacher from worrying about the presentation to actively seeking out how the kids were accepting the material.”

Now she is blazing another new trail for Pacific Symphony in the fledging Heartstrings program with CHOC. Cindy and her flute visit individual bedsides, set up for a couple hours with Eric, the music therapist, who plays a guitar in the playroom for kids feeling well that day, and perform on Radio Lollipop, a live broadcast that goes on air throughout the hospital at night. On the radio show, she uses the Music Minus One program, featuring recordings of classical music minus the flute part so she can play along.

The partnership with CHOC is part of Pacific Symphony’s Heartstrings, a community-wide program providing free access to concerts and classical music.

“Music is a universal element and all children love music. Being able to provide the patients and families with this Heartstrings program

“Working with kids feeds my brave piccolo-player soul.”



Pacific Symphony’s piccolo player, Cindy Ellis, performs for Radio Lollipop at CHOC hospital.

will not only help them feel better but it will help them forget all the pain and suffering they are going through while in the hospital,” states Amber Chavez, special programs coordinator at CHOC.

“You have to be able to punt, be willing to play ‘Puff the Magic Dragon’ on demand, and there’s not a lot you can rehearse for. Each time I go back, everything changes. I hope that the same kids aren’t still there or if they are, they are feeling better.”

Cindy picked up the flute for the first time when she was 9 1/2 years old. Her dad was a big Boston Pops fan and the weekly broadcast was a whole family event. “I fell in love the first time I heard the flute. I’d make a cardboard cutout and cover it with tinfoil and pretend to play along.”

Then the piccolo chose her. First in junior high when the band director asked her to play piccolo; then again when she joined the California All State Band.

“I was drawn to it. You do things that flute players can only dream about, plus it makes me twice as marketable.”

As a teacher, Cindy is in demand. For over 25 years she taught flute and lectured at California State University, Fullerton. Currently she is conducting a flute ensemble at Irvine Valley Community College.

“I only know how to live with music and through it. It has been a tremendous source of sanctuary and comfort as I have dealt with life’s passages: my older brother’s death, then my father’s sudden passing and the rapid decline of my mother. Working with kids feeds my brave piccolo-player soul. I never wonder if classical music is relevant. That first experience at Class Act resolved all doubts. I just hope that that little girl still listens to music.”

**Kelly Ruggirello was Pacific Symphony’s director of education when she and long-time supporter Valerie Imhof launched Class Act in 1994-95. She is now the President and CEO of Pacific Chorale. Valerie Imhof continues as Chair of Class Act for Pacific Symphony.*

PACIFIC SYMPHONY WELCOMES OUR 16 COMMUNITY PARTNERS FOR HEARTSTRINGS NIGHT, SPONSORED BY EDISON INTERNATIONAL

