

Muller Introduces 300 to Dulcimer

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For the Chieftain

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Enjoying the dulcimer open house, left to right, are: Don and Jo Hair of La Grande with a traditional mountain dulcimer, and Cece, Benjamin and Molly Curry of Joseph work with a student box dulcimer.

Nationally recognized musician Heidi Muller introduced more than 300 Wallowa County children and adults to the mountain dulcimer last week, spending time in classrooms and at an open house teaching the basics of playing the traditional folk instrument.

Though many had never laid a hand on a dulcimer before, Muller, with the aid of a fleet of student "box" dulcimers, had everyone playing a few simple songs by the end of each session she taught, including the timely Appalachian classic "Groundhog," which students of all ages enjoyed.

"I never heard the dulcimer before, but I love it," said open house attendee Sydney Pithoud, 10. "They're unique, not like other instruments. And they're easy to learn."

Elementary classes learned about the dulcimer in large groups, with Muller first discussing the history of the instrument - brought to Appalachia in the late 1800s by German settlers and developing into distinctive American styles from there - then moving into hands-on activities of noting and strumming.

Muller worked with 75 students from Joseph and 230 from Enterprise and then spent time with an additional 30 people at the open house.

Students took turns learning to play on special training versions of the dulcimer built from a regular wooden fret board mounted on a sturdy cardboard box. According to Muller, the box arrangement creates a surprisingly good sound and enables teachers to put dulcimers in the hands of many more students because of the lower expense.

Some dulcimers feature three strings, but for her own performances, Muller prefers to play four-stringed instruments because of the greater variety of picking options and chord depth they offer. She teaches using three-string dulcimers.

Muller displayed multiple instruments and demonstrated several different styles of playing during the sessions. She also explained similarities and differences between the dulcimer and more familiar instruments like guitars. For example, since the dulcimer is diatonic, using a capo can switch the instrument into a minor key.

"It sounded medieval when she did that," commented J.T. Myers, a sixth grader from Enterprise. "It was great."

Muller is offering Friday dulcimer classes for children that begin Feb. 10 and run through March 16; based on response, she may add additional classes to the planned 11:15 a.m. - noon slot at The Woodshed, the Wallowa Valley Music Alliance facility on River St. (Hurricane Creek Rd.) just off Hwy 82. The cost of \$30 includes the loan of a student dulcimer. Adult classes also started this week, with Tuesday classes running through March 13 at 1:30-3:00 p.m. And 6-7:30 p.m. The cost for the adult class is \$95; Muller has dulcimers available for rental or purchase.

Muller has been living, playing, teaching and writing songs in West Virginia over the past several years, but was based in Seattle from 1981-2000, and has long wished to return to the Northwest. She has been a regular visitor to Wallowa County over the years, making appearances at Fishtrap, Tunesmith, Fiddle Tunes, Courthouse Concerts and coordinating and teaching at the Dulcimer Week in the Wallowas summer camp. Muller also has music out on CDs, including "Songs from the End of the Road," and "Light the Winter's Dark," both of which feature her original songs.

"Since the county lacks enough private music teachers to teach those that want lessons, Heidi fills a vital role," said Wallowa Valley Music Alliance president Laura Skovlin. "Her warm and engaging teaching style makes music accessible to those of all ages and levels, and her energy and enthusiasm are a great asset to the community and our organization - we welcome her back to the area!"