

That's My Jam

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by Stephen Pitalo

When Junior Appalachian Musicians, Inc., aka JAM,

was first started by musician, educator and counselor Helen White in 2000, she was an elementary guidance counselor at Sparta School in rural Alleghany County, North Carolina. As a fiddler, she performed and taught nationally and internationally on a regular basis with well-known luthier/guitar player Wayne Henderson.

Through her travels she noticed that while other parts of the world were absorbing Appalachian music, the children of her own community did not have easy access to it. She and other musicians in the area were concerned with a drop-off in community transmission of old time and bluegrass music, leaving millennials who, despite growing up in the Appalachian Mountains, had never heard a banjo or been to a square dance. White also saw an opportunity to help at-risk kids achieve success with traditional music and connect them to something as special as a local music community that preserved a worldwide-renown art form.

From White's efforts, interest grew, and now children across four states can participate in the JAM after-



school program for children in grades 4 – 8 and beyond that introduces music through small group instruction on instruments common to the Appalachian region, such as fiddle, banjo and guitar. Each JAM program is individually operated and funded, and by affiliating with the JAM organization, each program is eligible to receive support and resources for free, and is licensed to use “Junior Appalachian Musicians (JAM)” to identify their traditional music education program.

Brett Morris, JAM’s Executive Director, continues to lead the charge for JAM.

“I can’t take credit for the idea of JAM; I am only lucky enough to work for such a wonderful organization.” Morris said. “I wish we knew how many total children have participated in a JAM program in the last twenty years, but it would be impossible to tell at this point.”

“In rural areas such as Alleghany County and others throughout Central Appalachia,” Morris explained, “there is historically low-funding for arts education with athletics commonly the only option for kids after school. So, the first after school program was built at Sparta School with some funding help from the National Endowment for the Arts, a collection of donated guitars, and the first official JAM instructor, Steve Kilby, of Mouth of Wilson, VA. In many ways, JAM was modeled after the success of the unique in-school string band program in neighboring Grayson County, Virginia at Mount Rogers K-12 Combined School, which has since closed. The program continues at Grayson County High School, where the students receive fine arts credit for learning to play old time and bluegrass music.”

Interest in the JAM program grew by leaps and bounds in the past two decades due to assistance from not just the NEA, but the North Carolina State Arts Council, Blue Ridge National Heritage Area and “The Crooked Road – Virginia’s Heritage Music Trail.” The NC State Arts Council still supplies funding to more than half of the NC JAM programs through its Traditional Arts Programs for Students initiative. In 2007, the Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation provided funding to allow the development of a regional infrastructure; the Dana Foundation, Virginia Commission for Arts, the Virginia Foundation for Humanities, the Blue Ridge National Heritage Area, the National Endowment for the Arts, the Harris and Frances Block Foundation and the Tides Foundation have provided funding for materials development.



Junior Appalachian Musicians

“There are currently 54 JAM affiliates in the 4-state region of North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee and Virginia,” Morris said. “We have been working closely with South Arts the past two years to develop JAM in East Tennessee, and we are proud to now have ten programs there. The number of JAM kids each school year at this point is around two thousand participants.”

Sadly, their leader Helen White passed away in October of last year, but the tradition and organization continue the work she began. She is sorely missed by all who worked with her, and so many young musicians have reaped from her life’s work.

“As the parent organization, we wish to ensure that each individual program is community led,” Morris reiterated, “while we provide sustainable resources such as training for teaching artists and program staff, exciting regional events for JAM kids, instruments, curriculum material, and partnerships with major festivals which give current and former students the opportunity to really get involved with traditional music in today’s world.”

“The most important thing about JAM is not necessarily to preserve the music and dance traditions of Appalachia, but to utilize carrying on these traditions as a way to build a

strong sense of place in every child,” Morris explained.



“Participating in a JAM program provides natural community engagement to students and their families, which helps them be proud of where they are from. Since old time and bluegrass is such a socially based music, it also fosters self-confidence and healthy relationships. We feel that JAM truly builds community one tune at a time.”

<https://youtu.be/xTmx08PB51M>