

LESSONS IN C COURAGE

Vignettes of Independent Teachers

By Alison S. Barr, NCTM

Years from now, we'll recall March 2020 as a time of rude awakenings. No longer did eager students, clad in sports uniforms, bounce up the front walk with bulging music bags. No longer did Mom or Dad snore lightly on the waiting room couch. No longer did we casually pull a score off the shelf. Instead, we tripped over ethernet cables, fiddled with Zoom preferences and braced our ears against untuned instruments played over the internet.

Independent teachers, many with rudimentary technological skills and limited resources, rescued themselves from professional demise and offered essential continuity to their students. They did this when music lessons may have mattered most. The following narratives are a testament to the strength, flexibility and courage it took to adjust. Whom did teachers lean on? Did their teaching change? Did their ability to survive in the marketplace help them pivot? In each vignette, I offer an introduction, a core challenge and a takeaway for the future.

SHELBY LaPointe

Shelby LaPointe lives in a charming farmhouse in rural Vermont with her husband and daughter, Shenandoah, born in January 2020. Shelby's a consummate young professional—intelligent, articulate and completely devoted to teaching. She had planned a six-week



Shelby LaPointe

maternity leave, but felt completely daunted when the pandemic hit. Her normally soaring confidence ebbed and her isolation was pervasive. With characteristic humor, she says, "I guess I brought social distancing to a new level. I didn't reach out right away to my colleagues for help and support."

When she did reach out to a former teacher, Shelby's plans coalesced in a matter of weeks.

Her central question: "What need can I fill while staying true to my teaching values?" She listened "non-stop" to business podcasts. She thought about her perfect teaching scenario. "I've long felt that social interaction is the key to effective learning. My students learn best when they feel solid on a piece before they leave the lesson." More lesson time would be better than less. Gradually, a plan came together. Remote teaching enabled convenient scheduling and the ability for students to tune in twice a week. In the spring of 2020, Shelby started her first beginning group class. It combined 60 minutes of group instruction with 20 minutes of private lesson time, all in the same week. "I would never have offered this class pre-pandemic!"

As of this writing, Shelby's first cohort is Zooming along beautifully. Her natural energy is reinvigorated. Her plans brim with ambition and hope. More group classes will start soon. She envisions an expanded studio with multiple teaching rooms to accommodate the group/private model. Shelby plans for LaPointe School of Music's income to be the predominant part of her family's livelihood. Her new direction is taking on a power of its own. "Students who are constantly learning and striving to reach new levels are students who want to stick around."

JACQUI Savage

Jacqui Savage exudes joy as she speaks about her thriving multi-teacher studio in Falmouth, Maine. Her studio has a Disney-like quality, with a sleek grand piano, festooned with a colorful spread and a floor-to-ceiling treble clef. In March 2020, Jacqui went from teaching more than 50 students in this magical space, to teaching those lessons on her iPad. Ocular migraines plagued her during ultra-long teaching days. "I was about to say I couldn't do this." Panicked, she called her doctor. "Stand, stretch, look away from the screen during every lesson," her doctor said. Jacqui used her already-expansive tech savvy to build in a few minutes of screen-shared theory practice. She purchased an ergonomic chair and planned some standing lessons.

"Music teachers have big ears; they hear everything. It's extremely over-stimulating, until you learn to zone the non-essential out." She meditated to stave off anxiety. She brainstormed incessantly. "Community is really important to me, so keeping it alive was crucial." She hosted pre-virtual recital parties, offering drive-up gift bags, photo booths and chances to preview recital pieces. She flooded social media with student highlights. Her proudest achievement was presenting her June Ensemble Recitals using DaVinci Resolve editing software. She put together two recitals of 65 students. "Parents were really thankful that they had some routine," Jacqui reflects. YouTube tutorials, her co-teachers, the Zoom help center and the Southern Maine Music Teachers Association, affiliated with MTNA, inspired her.

Jacqui's innate discipline, creativity and work ethic served her well. The parents of her students look at her reverentially when they think back on all she offered. "They never knew I could do all this, and neither did I. And, I've had some time to practice and perform on piano, not just on the organ for church." On Valentine's Day in 2021, she gave a stunning livestream recital with a violinist and soprano. Work-life balance seems better than ever before. Jacqui hopes to maintain that through constant vigilance. "One thing about piano teachers is that we know how to troubleshoot."



Jacqui Savage

SCOTT Donald

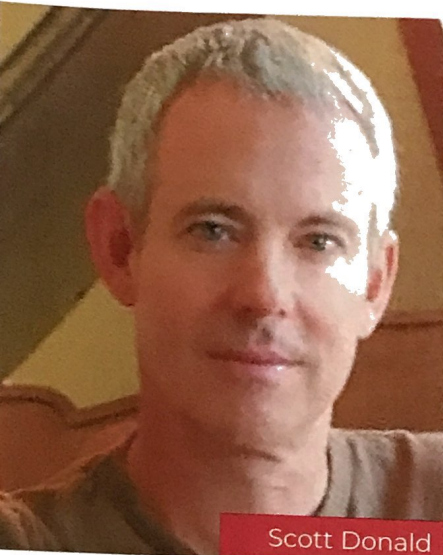
To know Scott Donald is, quite simply, to love him. He is kind and funny, a born teacher. He builds community arts alliances and fosters global student networks. He speaks proudly of his “unexpected journey to independence” after years of serving on university faculties and at the New School for Music Study in New Jersey. In the fall of 2019, Scott moved into a new studio space to accommodate his vision for expansion. Studio A would grow into a community music school with a gorgeous performance space, ample room for group and preschool classes and an extra studio for an apprentice teacher.

Scott took Studio A completely online in March 2020, adopting the Zoom platform. “I was not terrified, but I wasn’t sure how parents would respond.” “Chatter” from colleagues and offerings by Austin District Music Teachers Association, his local chapter of MTNA, helped guide him. “I wanted my standard of teaching to remain the same.” He cheerfully conducted Zoom interviews for new

students and was a volunteer teacher for American Voices YES Academy students in Lebanon and Syria.

Bookings soared for recordings in his performance space. Scott livestreamed a stunning recital featuring music of *Les Six*. Studio A combined the flexibility of an independent studio with the expansiveness of a community music school—a super-model for COVID times. “We are stronger when we are with other people who are really strong.”

In late 2020, Scott was informed by his landlord that the building housing Studio A was slated for demolition. Turning on a thin dime, Scott signed another lease, this time on a larger, more versatile space. He shares the lease with a collective of rock musicians, his co-teacher and an arts management company. There are large rehearsal and performance spaces. “It’s a village and it’s crazy. My head spins sometimes.” Scott has come through the pandemic with intense pride in his profession. “Some individuals who would never, ever have adapted, jumped in. They are the truly courageous ones.”



Scott Donald

HEATHER Rogers Riley

Heather Rogers Riley lives in the Jamaica Plain neighborhood of Boston. Her living room studio is replete with dark, velvet wood, a gorgeous oriental rug and her lovingly maintained 1935 Model A Mason & Hamlin. “I immediately fell in love with the gloriously lush, powerful, warm bass; the sensitive, singing tone and how effortless it felt to play it.” Heather emanates accomplishment and warmth.

She is Massachusetts Music Teachers Association’s Immediate Past President and the organization’s 2017 Teacher of the Year. Visit her website and you’re immediately struck by her prodigious gifts.

Friday, March 13, 2020, was Heather’s first 100% online teaching day. She’s still in awe that every single student had the faith and trust to come along with her. “I did extensive research on the internet, but first and foremost, I relied on my existing tech knowledge—explored creative solutions for myself.”

Heather credits her mother with setting an example of calm focus in a crisis. She was able to combat her self-doubt and fear. She painstakingly perfected a tech set-up with four camera angles: one webcam overhead, one webcam on the left, one iPhone on the right, one iPad providing a “headshot” face view on the music rack and also serving as a portable camera. At the first lesson with this complete set-up, Heather gave her students a full “tour.” Her students’ responses overwhelmed her. “I felt SO proud of myself for all the hard work I put into creating the new setup and so satisfied that I had created a superior studio experience that they perhaps wouldn’t find anywhere else!”

“To give positive, healing energy through the music while striving for effective communication through a screen...it’s hard to manage that level of giving while also attend-



Heather Rogers Riley

ing to myself.” This was the most challenging part for Heather. “Work-life balance means something totally different now.” Early on, Heather sent her students a “from-the-heart” letter promising them the best she could offer while asking for their patience, understanding and support. How courageous is that?

ELLEN Everett

Meet Ellen Everett, a gentle and compassionate independent teacher with a wealth of experience. Ellen lives in a suburb of Boston



Ellen Everett

and teaches from her spacious living room. She was feeling “stressed, pressed and overwhelmed” with her studio and church job *before* the pandemic. The thought of things shutting down for a few weeks came as a relief. “I can finally take a break.” That optimism was dashed as Ellen listened to the news

and heard that local colleagues were going remote. “I would never, ever do *that*,” she thought. But, eight teaching days later, with an iPad she retrieved from a closet and an iPhone she hadn’t yet learned how to answer, she was back fulltime! Of her 28 students, 19 transferred to online lessons.

Ellen’s sense of deep panic turned into one of concerted action. She was on a mission. She spoke to local colleagues, watched webinars and read blogs late into the night. The Apple geniuses, Comcast tech support and her generous nephew became Ellen’s new best friends. She leaned into the wind, learning to text, poring over iPad adapters, delivering party bags for a Christmas Zoom. Most agonizing, yet most rewarding, was the triumph of her first virtual recital, after a 17-hour download. As she watched it, Ellen’s pride in herself and her students was palpable.

The path Ellen traveled is perhaps the most heroic of all my subjects. Her smiling positivity is unwavering and her commitment uncompro-

mised. Her backstory is poignant. After losing her husband, Glenn, in 2018, Ellen soldiered forward. Admittedly, she was lonely. She hoped to maintain the status quo for the rest of her teaching career. When I asked Ellen, “Did this journey change you permanently?” I was in tears at her reply: “This was a lifesaver, a life-changer. It gave me purpose, caused me to be inquisitive and search for answers. Now, I look for what I can try *first, second, third*.” Ellen’s patience and resolute dedication to her students have moved her toward a whole new self.

I feel unswerving admiration for independent teachers. They create, adapt and persevere without the protection and infrastructure of an institution. They singlehandedly generate an entire income. Their students come first. I’m not surprised that these five teachers, among many others, displayed pioneer spirit that a global pandemic demanded. They did it for themselves, certainly, but they also did it for their students. They provided stability while so much was in a state of utter disruption. Independent teachers led the way, aided by thoughtful colleagues, a network of excellent pop-up resources and especially, by an incomparable professional organization—MTNA. I echo Scott Donald when he says he’s intensely proud of who we are as a profession.

Where now? Maybe it’s an instruction package that combines virtual flexibility with in-person charisma. Perhaps we envision a free-flowing collaboration for teachers; no one is isolated in his/her own studio. Maybe an avatar teacher and her student drop in from another place in the world to observe a lesson. The sky’s the limit and courage our magic carpet! ✨

Alison S. Barr, NCTM, operates an independent studio in Hanover, Massachusetts, where she teaches students of many ages, levels and home countries. A dedicated MTNA member since 1976, she created Massachusetts Music Teachers Association’s Music Connect Program in 2018.

