

Lifetime passion becomes longtime career

By Caitlin Hites, Daily News staff writer | Posted: Tuesday, May 17, 2016 12:00 am

While Michelle Karel-Ward refers to the beginning of her teaching career as "accidental, in a happy way," she has made no mistake in keeping Moscow Music Academy alive since 1993.

Karel-Ward said growing up she was passionate about two things: sports and music. The first instrument she played was the recorder, followed by guitar.

"I started taking lessons for the guitar, and after a while the teacher told my mom, 'She knows more than I do; you need to find her someone else,' " Karel-Ward said. "From there, I just kept taking more and more lessons until college."

Karel-Ward received her bachelor's and master's degrees from the Lionel Hampton School of Music at the University of Idaho. Up until the last semester of her graduate work, she still wasn't entirely sure what her plan would be after completing her studies.

"The last semester of my graduate year, my major professor invited me to take over his teaching position at (Spokane Falls Community College). I kind of inherited his spot," she said.

She drove up one day a week and did a full day of teaching.

"Community college is so hands-on - the philosophy is a little different from a typical university," she said. "After about 10 years I ended up stepping away from that because I needed to focus on making (Moscow Music Academy) more than it was."

Moscow Music Academy began as a guitar studio before Karel-Ward decided to expand her clientele. After more than 20 years of growth, Moscow Music Academy now has a full staff to provide guitar, bass, ukulele, recorder, piano, drum and voice lessons to students of all ages and ability levels.

It was the community college atmosphere that inspired Karel-Ward to form her teaching style.

Karel-Ward is a lifelong athlete and sports-lover, and she lets those passions inspire her in her teaching career.

Recently, with the help of a colleague, she developed the "Musical Ladder System" to set milestones for students.

"Athletes get recognition for almost everything," Karel-Ward said. "Musicians really don't get that recognition, and they don't get that validation or affirmation of 'hey, you did a good job; you're here now;



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Moscow Music Academy instructor Michelle Karel-Ward works with student Ryan Hemati on Saturday afternoon in Moscow.

keep going and you'll be there.' "

The ladder system has created benchmarks and goals to provide incentives for students to keep practicing even after hitting a musical block.

"It's frustrating to hit that wall, and if there's no particular foreseeable goal, it's easy to lose motivation and stop playing," she said.

As the director of Moscow Music Academy, Karel-Ward has the freedom to create these programs and teach in the way she thinks will be most helpful to her students.

"(Private instruction) gives me the flexibility to really take time with and connect with the student and mentor them on their musical journey," she said.

Karel-Ward's main focus is to provide consistency and quality of music instruction for her students.

"Students connect with teachers, so we like to look for teachers who will be here long term," she said.

Music isn't just incorporated into Karel-Ward's career, but her every day life and hobbies as well.

While her wife, Emma, mainly just "plays the radio," Karel-Ward's musical hobbies still take up much of her time. Currently, she is a member of two different bands, Coldrail Blues Band and Voodoo City Radio.

She explained that after reluctantly auditioning for VCR as a favor to a friend, Chris Lucier, she was chosen for the band and didn't even know the name.

"About a year later, Chris told me I was a founding member of the band," Karel-Ward said while laughing. "We just have too much fun."

Karel-Ward's love for music transfers to all parts of her life, overlapping where necessary and never quite ending.

The Moscow Music Academy's spring Student Showcase will take place at 1 p.m. Saturday at the Kenworthy Performing Arts Centre, 508 S. Main St. The public is invited to attend the performances at no cost.

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