

## Tuned in to pianos

### Vancouver school has taught visually impaired to work on pianos for 60 years

BY SCOTT HEWITT  
COLUMBIAN STAFF WRITER



Wilson Charles, 29, came to the School of Piano Technology for the Blind to learn a marketable skill. (Photos by STEVEN LANE/The Columbian)

To most of us, the piano is some kind of magical mystery box. You sit down and play, and what comes out represents perfect precision in sound. Each key does exactly what it's supposed to do, sounds exactly the way it's supposed to sound in relation to its neighbors, and the whole is a thing of mathematical beauty (skill of the player notwithstanding, of course).

#### **Piano technicians know differently.**

"People think you just sit down and make music," said Mark Burbey, a student at the School of Piano Technology for the Blind in the Hudson's Bay neighborhood. "But there are literally thousands of parts that have to work together."

"I have learned more about pianos in the past six months than I ever thought possible," said student Robert Giles. Giles has always been mechanically inclined, but he's not a musician. Burbey is. According to school executive director Len Leger, mechanical aptitude probably outweighs musical talent when it comes to learning to be a piano tech.

What Burbey and Giles do share is reliance on their hands and their ears. All eight students, three instructors and Leger, the school president, have some level of visual impairment, from progressive glaucoma to total blindness from birth.

The chief mission of the school is to equip its students for productive, lucrative careers tuning and repairing America's 18 million pianos, Leger said. It's hard for blind people to find work," said Leger. "Fifty to sixty percent of blind people are unemployed. But eighty to ninety percent of our graduates are employed."

Sometimes it's a university with a lot of practice instruments that take a daily beating, he said. Sometimes it's a musical instrument shop that needs to keep its stock ready to sell. And often, he said with pride, it's a student who starts a private business as an itinerant piano tuner. Out of the school's more than 300 graduates, Leger said, more than 200 have gone into business for themselves. "We've been incubating small businesses for 60 years," he said.

If you're curious about the complexity of piano guts — and the sight doesn't make you faint — today is your big chance. The school is celebrating its 60th anniversary with an open house. Tours begin at 10 a.m. and there will be entertainment and refreshments from 4 to 7 p.m.

The first blind piano tuner is thought to be a man named Claude Montal, who attended the Royal Institution for Blind Youth in Paris, France, in the 1830s. He proved to a skeptical world that blind people could do the job, Leger said.

In 1949, Emil Fries (pronounced frees) set up his private nonprofit school here in Vancouver after the Washington State School for the Blind eliminated vocational education in favor of academics alone, Leger said. Fries, who thought vocational education was crucial, quit his teaching post and mortgaged everything he owned to start his school. "He was legally blind himself," said Leger. And — it must be confessed — he's another legendary piano man who didn't actually play the piano. But he saw a need. His school remains the only private, nonprofit, vocational piano technology school for the blind in the world, Leger said. (He said he went online to try to disprove that long-standing claim, and couldn't).

Students at the school take a two-year, full-time course of study — putting in 2,800 clock hours of training time and mastering 343 individual tasks. "Not everybody masters everything," Leger said. "Everybody learns at a different rate." But graduates must be ready to perform normal home repairs (nothing that requires bringing the instrument in and putting it up on the proverbial lift) and tune the instrument in "a commercially acceptable time."

Students start out taking hundreds of hours to tune one instrument, he said. They end up — if all goes well — ready to tune a couple per day. Not everybody makes it, he said. Some "heavy testing" of hearing and other skills is a prerequisite for entering the school. The myth that blind people have extra sharp hearing is a stereotype that turns out often to be true, he said. "Brain research has demonstrated the plasticity of the brain. If you lose one sense, your brain can rewire itself to compensate."

### **Big bucks**

Fries — who wrote a book called "But You Can Feel It," which is what his mother said to him when he complained about being sightless — died in 1997. His school has had its ups and downs, Leger said, but today it's going strong. It's commonly known as a "piano hospital" because it repairs and sells donated pianos to support its mission.

The school recruits heavily via the Internet, and students have come from 36 states and 14 countries. Wilson Charles, 29, is a Haitian native. He was majoring in political science at the University of Pennsylvania, he said, when he realized he needed a marketable skill. The classical pianist and singer decided to take a break from university and take the piano school's two-year course so he can make "big bucks," he said. Those bucks will help him finish his college education and head for law school, he said.

Giles, who came from South Carolina, said a friend suggested he put his mechanical aptitude to use — he used to pull apart and rebuild computers for fun, he said — after he burned out on customer service. "My wife and I sold the mobile home, and here we are," he said.