

Fine-tuned for Success

Sunday, June 17, 2007

BY COURTNEY SHERWOOD

Four years ago, the future seemed dark at Vancouver's piano-tuning school for the blind. Then known as the Emil B. Fries Piano Hospital, the school was losing money. Enrollment was down. Fewer people were looking to have their pianos serviced. The school was in a crisis that began shortly after longtime leader Ken Serviss left in 2001.

This year's graduating class heads to Canada, New York and Las Vegas in search of work at a time when their alma mater seems destined for a better future.

With the arrival of new leader Len Leger, enrollment and revenues are up and there is a clear vision for the renamed School of Piano Technology for the Blind.

The school's history

The Emil B. Fries Piano Hospital was founded in 1949 by Fries, a former Washington State School for the Blind teacher.

"About 60 to 70 percent of blind or visually impaired people are unemployed or underemployed," said Leger, Executive Director of the school. The school provides an alternative, by teaching students how to tune pianos. They practice on donated instruments. The tuning and service work performed by students and staff provided 85 percent of the school's revenues.

Sales dropped at the start of this decade, in part because the school had gradually become less visible, but also because of global trends as people buy keyboards rather than pianos. "The school was losing money, and it needed to think of new ways to keep the mission going," Leger said.

The turnaround

Leger was graduate program coordinator at the Rochester Institute of Technology in New York when he started losing his vision. Around the same time, his and his wife's interest in moving to the West Coast was fulfilled when Leger's wife accepted a job offer at Southwest Washington Medical Center. Leger knew nothing about the piano-tuning school at the time.

"I wanted to work with the blind and visually impaired people," said Leger, who has a degenerative vision disorder. He quickly applied when he learned of the opening. After he was hired in 2004, he reached out to the school's governing board, inviting new members to join and add their expertise. With lawyers, bankers, classical pianists, business owners and piano school alumni, "all of the skill sets we need are represented on the board," Leger said.

He also brought back retired former director Serviss as an adjunct faculty member.

With the guidance of the board, the school began to make drastic changes, beginning with the name.

"Emil B. Fries Piano Hospital doesn't really give our mission," Leger said. Although Fries is well known in some circles in Vancouver, the name School of Piano Technology for the Blind helps the school reach students and donors who might not understand the school's purpose, he said.

The turnaround was more than just a superficial name change. Leger restructured the finances, cutting expenses and shifting the business model away from relying on tuning and service work for 85 percent of the revenues. Now the school aims to get 40 percent of its budget from piano tuning and service, 20 percent from tuition, and 40 percent from fundraising and development.

The school tapped into big foundations. Grants from the Meyer Memorial Trust and other groups have paid to develop a strategic plan and to improve its Web site.

After several years of negative cash flow, the School of Piano Technology for the Blind ended its 2005-2006 school year with a net gain of \$11,140. It projects a similar surplus this year.

Long-term goals

Those surpluses reflect a small margin for a school with total income of \$506,028 and expenses of \$482,354 this year.

"We need to build our endowment", Leger said. To do so, the school has hired a development specialist who is scheduling fundraisers and applying for more foundation help.

Just as important, the small school hopes to double its enrollment. Today, four students attend. By 2009, Leger hopes enrollment will hold steady at eight.

Piano sales and repair are also an important source of funding for the school, which is aiming for a 6 percent revenue increase in these areas in the coming year. Reaching out to the community is already making a difference, Leger said.

Students say they are relieved that the school will survive.

"I was facing a dark future, because I didn't know what I was going to do once I lost my vision," said Lori Amstutz of Vancouver, a legally blind student at the school. "This gives blind people something to work toward."



Len Leger, Executive Director of the School of Piano Technology for the Blind, stands in front of repaired pianos available for sale. DAVE OLSON/The Columbian



Student Shawn Brock tunes a piano, a skill he plans to take to Las Vegas after he graduates from the School of Piano Technology for the Blind.