

Mission: self-sufficiency

School of Piano Technology for the Blind adds business program

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When Bruce Lulow, a small business consultant volunteering for SCORE's Vancouver chapter, was presented with the opportunity to set up a business program for the Vancouver-based School of Piano Technology for the Blind, he didn't think twice.

"My hand immediately shot up," he said. "I have a soft spot for people with sight problems. Not being able to see – that's tough. If we can make it easier for them, we should. It's the right thing to do."

Lulow has lost sight in both of his eyes at different times, and currently only sees out of one of his eyes.

"The partnership was a natural fit," he



said.

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Student Lisa Quackenbush places thin paper washers on the pins each wooden key rests on in order to adjust all the keys to a uniform height when completed. The washers become compressed over time and need to be refitted periodic

The Service Corps of Retired Executives, or SCORE, is a national nonprofit network of retired executives who conduct free one-on-one counseling for small businesses owners.

Len Leger, executive director for the School of Piano Technology for the Blind, heard a presentation by a SCORE counselor at a Lion's Club meeting in January, and also had a feeling the partnership would be a beneficial one.

The school's mission is to give students the tools they need to be independent, find customers and establish businesses after they graduate, and the addition of the business program furthered that mission.

During the summer, Lulow, with fellow SCORE counselors Art Ricchiutti and Paul Freeman and administrative assistant Alicia Sampath, developed a two-year program that guides students through creating a business plan and becoming acquainted with the business



community.

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By feel, and with a special spacer temporarily placed on a section of the strings, Marshall Gisondi can set the accuracy to an eighth-inch distance.

"Our motivation was to do a better job preparing students to do a better job," Leger said. "We've always included business in our training, but we've always just relied on our alumni. We felt a need for a broader understanding of the role in business in society."

Last year was the first trial run of the program, albeit a less-structured version. SCORE counselors officially started working with the school in February – too soon for the spring graduates to get a full course load.

The students got a five-month taste of the courses, and two of the three graduates found employment in New York and Alabama respectively within two months of graduation and one started her own business in Calgary, Canada, soon after graduation.

The full two-year program was launched this fall with the five current students. Two more students have been accepted for February, with the possibility of the addition of two



more.

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Working on just the 36 black keys, student Chelsea Armstrong applies paper washers to a pin set-up which allows for proper key height adjustment. She is

working on a Smith & Barnes upright piano.

There are two business courses per semester, and students are required to participate in the program to graduate. Courses include Business 101, a look at legal and licensing matters, business operations, marketing and dealing with money.

Because the program is so new, the courses and syllabi are being tweaked as the classes go, Lulow said.

"This is a work in process, and we're learning as we go," he said. "We won't know until that first test in December how we're doing."

Students are assigned individual SCORE mentors, who meet with them regularly to review students' progress and help with course work.

The courses take the form of classroom lectures, attendance at SCORE's small business seminars and on- and off-site visits with government agencies and local business people, who can give them real-life pointers.



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In the repair shop at the Piano Hospital, Shawn Brock, left, reconditions the keys from a grand piano. Brock said that a piano may need its action overhauled only once in its lifetime with average use. A piano used daily in a st

Ultimately, students make a business plan for starting a business in the location of their choice and defend it to their instructors and SCORE mentor and submit it to a financial institution for loan consideration.

Bank of Clark County has agreed to allow students to meet with loan officers and review the viability of their business plans.

Kim Capeloto, bank president and chief operating officer, is chairman of the piano school's board of directors and chair of its financial committee.

Both as an ambassador of the school and a local businessman, Capeloto applauded the goal of helping students become entrepreneurial.

"For many of these students, it's their first foray into the business world," he said. "What exactly is needed to start a business is very much the same if you're visually impaired or not ... it is essential for individuals beginning, expanding or changing their business careers to know exactly what they should expect."

Although the information the students receive is the same anybody who walked into the SCORE office would get, Lulow said his first question was how to teach visually impaired students.

Each of the students has different sight impairments, he said. For those who have some vision, the materials are blown up and students either hold them very close to their eyes or use magnifying



glasses.

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Student Sandra Love begins to learn the art of piano tuning on her first day tuning a Yamaha upright. She begins to learn the technique by tuning octaves.

Some of the materials are transcribed to Braille, and many of the students tape classes and replay them later.

“It’s certainly not like teaching anyone else,” Lulow said. “The teaching may be different, but the content is no different than what we do at SCORE.”

In developing the curriculum, Lulow was hoping to base it on an existing program.

Only problem? There isn’t one.

There are a half dozen piano tuning schools in the country, and most are correspondence courses with on-the-job training. Vancouver’s is by far the oldest and the only one in the world for the blind, Lulow said.

About 70 percent of the blind and visually impaired population in the United States is unemployed or underemployed, Leger said. There aren’t many meaningful jobs for the non-sighted population.

“Imagine what that does to the human spirit,” he said. “We’re offering a chance to be self-employed.”

With Social Security disability insurance, non-sighted people generally receive less than \$700 a month for all of their living expenses.

“What contribution are you making to society if you’re basically existing?” Leger said. “That’s a different feeling than if you’re overcoming a challenge, you’re working, maybe married and putting your kids through college.

“To know that you’re contributing to society rather than costing it – that’s huge.”

So far, students have responded well to the new program, and see it as a bonus to their technical training, Leger said.

“When you go to a technical school you generally learn the trade and learning to apply it is up to you,” he said. “We teach them how.”

THE SCHOOL OF PIANO TECHNOLOGY FOR THE BLIND AT A GLANCE

There have been 300 graduates in 58 years

Students have come from 36 states and 10 foreign countries

Three blind instructors teach the 343 technical tasks to be mastered before graduation, plus the new business program requirements

The school has the capacity for 12 students, but usually has five or six in a class

It costs about \$26,000 to attend over two years plus living expenses. It’s the school’s long-term goal to add a dormitory with furnished apartments for students to cut down on costs.

The school is the only school of its kind in the world. Blind teachers teach blind and visually impaired students.

LIKE APPLES IN A BASKET

Business skills imperative to piano tuning career

Learning business skills is imperative for piano technicians, said John Cooke, a registered piano technician who’s owned Vancouver-based John Cooke Piano Services since 1982.

“It’s kind of like apples in a basket,” he said. “The apples are your tuning and repair skills, and let’s say you excel in those areas. But if you don’t have a basket to carry those apples – you don’t have a business plan and you’re just going out and tuning – you’re not going to get very far very fast.”

Attempting to run a successful independent business requires an array of skills from maintaining visibility in the community, rustling up business and adequately pricing services, on top of taking care of one’s own health care, retirement, employees, paying taxes and actually doing the job, Cooke said.

“(The training) is going to improve the students’ rate of survivability,” he said. “A lot of times, new businesses last for three years and go under. But it’s not going to guarantee their success because if you can’t do your job, it doesn’t matter how glitzy your card is or how big your Yellow Pages ad, if you can’t tune a piano, you’re not going to get call-backs.”

Even students not looking into setting up their own shop stand to make themselves more desirable and valuable employees because they’ll understand the needs of their employers.

Cooke is a member of the Piano Technicians Guild's Portland chapter, the regional chapter for Portland and Southwest Washington, and said the chapter dedicates 15 percent of its seminars and training on business topics for this very reason.

It is difficult for technicians to break into the business because one has to have a minimum number of pianos to survive, but Cooke said he didn't think it would be much more difficult for a visually impaired tuner than for a sighted one.

It is easier and safer for a person starting out to work in a music store or university to learn the business and make inevitable mistakes under the umbrella of established businesses, he added.