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Saxophonist's legacy lives on in school band

By JOE ROBERTSON
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The 12-year-old girl reached for the clarinet's bell-shaped end first.

She drew it out of the felt-lined case, unsure what to do next.

"Now this," classmate Diego Lee said, handing Da'Treona Friday one of the instrument's barrels, sleek and black with silver tabs and valves.

She gingerly pressed the pieces together, joint by joint. Then the mouthpiece. Then the delicate ligature that would hold the reed.

"Don't squeeze on these," Diego said, watching closely. "You'll break it."

For a long time, the Banneker Charter Academy in Kansas City had wanted a band, but had no instruments and no means to start one.

Across the state line, the family of Jeremy Frye sought a way to remember a saxophonist who had planned to become a public school music teacher before he died of a brain tumor at age 23.

Here, at Banneker, the two aches found relief.

Jeremy Frye's fiancée, Jamie Frye, was watching this week as the students put together flutes, trombones, trumpets and clarinets — many of them handling instruments for the first time.

Jeremy's father, Harold, watched, too.

In the months after Jeremy's death in June 2008, the family started the Music 4 Jeremy's Cherubs Foundation. They began collecting used instruments to be refurbished and delivered to schools where poverty prevented many children from having instruments of their own.

"We want to play in the bands like on TV at football games," said Miles Hopkins, 11, who added that he wanted to be the next Miles Davis.

Diego, 12, regarded his clarinet, remembering an uncle who played.

"We want to play in colleges," he said.

One by one, the 10 students and their director, Jim Neihart, worked toward the opening day's mission: landing that first, solid note — "concert F."

Jeremy Frye would like to see this, said Jamie, who legally changed her last name to Frye after he died.

"Jeremy's favorite thing," she said, "was playing with kids and teaching them to love it the way he loved it."

The union of the school and the foundation came by chance.

Neihart was looking for help last spring. Banneker Principal Marian Brown had called the 80-year-old administrator and band leader out of semi-retirement to start a band — though they had no instruments and no place for a band room but an open foyer with a piano and a storage closet.

Neihart tried the usual way of drumming up interest. He sent a letter home to every parent telling them about the band, along with a flier from a music store that offered instrument rentals for \$15 a month. But Banneker is a school where more than 95 percent of the students qualify for free or reduced-cost lunch, and almost none of the parents replied.

The school needed to provide the instruments without rental fees, he determined. Neihart embarked on a slow process, seeking out people who had old instruments they could donate. He had accumulated four instruments by early summer when someone who knew about the Frye foundation overheard Neihart making his plea.

"I don't think it could have happened any other way," Neihart said.

The Frye foundation had been collecting used instruments over the past year, raising money for parts, and collaborating with the B.A.C. Horn Doctor instrument repair company in Olathe to make old instruments look and sound like new.

The foundation had begun distributing instruments to students, but Neihart gave it a chance to help start an entire program from scratch.

A band does so much for a school, Banneker music teacher Johnalita White said. Music theory resonates more deeply. Children restore their link to innate melodies. Academic performance benefits, too.

“Band broadens their brain,” she said.

Neihart loves the students’ enthusiasm. Some of them, such as Xavier Black, 11, got an early taste of band during the summer. He had played a recorder — a plastic flutelike instrument — while they waited for more of the real band instruments that were coming.

The sixth-grader was in the nurse’s office the first day back in school, getting his temperature taken when he saw Neihart pass by. He ran after him, the thermometer still dangling in his mouth, Neihart said.

“And he asked me, ‘Mr. Neihart, when are you going to start the band class?’ ”

Now Xavier was working a real trombone. A beautiful brass weight in his hands.

“Your lips have to be strong,” he said. “You’ve got to hold it right and not let it fall.”

@ Go to **KansasCity.com** for a photo gallery of students and their instruments.

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