

Ithaca woman enriches the lives of MacCormick residents

BY MARJORIE OLDS • DECEMBER 18, 2010, 12:00 AM

(Editor's note: This is the first in a series on juvenile justice issues that will appear on this page over the next several months.)

Elisa Evett grew up in Ithaca, the daughter of an artist in the Fine Arts Department at Cornell University. With a Ph.D. in Art History, she has taught over the years at Cornell and Syracuse universities, and Ithaca and Wells colleges, while at the same time pursuing her love of music. Around 1990, she began teaching cello to many enthusiasts. She also performed in chamber music groups and, in 1997, she took over the



helm of Music's Recreation, a not-for-profit arts organization devoted to exposing young people to classical music in a relaxed, informal atmosphere.

In 2001, after completing a tutor training course with Tompkins Learning Partners, Evett started tutoring in reading and writing at MacCormick Secure Center, one of three Office of Children and Family Services (OCFS) public facilities in Tompkins County, in which teenagers from around the state are incarcerated. (The George Jr. Republic, located in Freeville, to which young people may be sentenced by the courts, also is supervised by OCFS.). A few years later, after learning from a member of MacCormick's Community Advisory Board that some of the teen residents had expressed an interest in learning how to play a stringed instrument, Evett (known affectionately as "Lizzy") contacted me about teaching cello at MacCormick and, with the help of a receptive director at the center, Evett began a new chapter unlike any other in her life.

Evett gave cello lessons to young men at MacCormick for several years, thanks in part to the generous gift of an instrument to the facility from Ithacan John Oakley. The young men's willingness to invest their time and the necessary discipline, despite their inability to practice during the week, inspired Evett to fit lessons at MacCormick in with her own private teaching schedule. Unfortunately, changes at the facility a year ago made it impossible to continue music lessons.

Throughout this time, Evett has continued working one-on-one with young men at MacCormick; she recalls one young man who would always arrive at his tutoring session acting reserved and withdrawn. At the beginning of the session he would uniformly answer "I don't know," regardless of

the question Evett posed. But after being provided a respectful pause to allow him time to regroup, this resident's eyes would brighten, and his face would become luminous, as he came up with a creative answer in his own time.

Evett has appreciated the support and help she has received from the MacCormick staff. Throughout her years as a tutor, she has benefited from the resources and guidance offered by both Teri Reinemann and Arline Woolley of Tompkins Learning Partners.

Evett speaks sorrowfully of the kids she has met who, despite eagerness to study toward a high school degree, have had so little experience in school that a high school degree is often unattainable, even with a devoted tutor. Still, Evett has been moved by each and every young man at MacCormick with whom she has worked. Whether teaching cello or tutoring, her attention is focused on that one young man, and for many young people, especially those who grow into adulthood away from their families and their communities, that attention is rare.

Recently Evett has expanded her tutoring role to work as an assistant in a social studies classroom, and she has resumed her music instruction — this time with violin: One young man nostalgically recalls his earlier instruction in violin and his current eagerness to continue — to connect to one of the sweeter memories he carries with him wherever he is sent by the Court and the State. Dave Zimet at Hickey's Music has generously offered the rental of a violin at a discount rate. Unable to find anyone else to come to the center to teach violin, Evett hopes she will be able to guide this eager student.

I hope the public will join Evett in bringing this rare opportunity to one young man, who once played violin before he was incarcerated. Who knows what is possible when our community links up with the young people living behind bars in our county.

Anyone wishing to volunteer time, offer a musical instrument or recording equipment, or financially support a program, please contact me at CABMacCormick@gmail.com. Your contributions have enriched the lives of these young men, who live within our community until they can go home.
