

# One Happy Family: Notes of Camaraderie

Dr. Barry Bittman, MD

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Amidst the trials and tribulations of a society facing the monumental challenges of youth violence, occasional glimpses of our greatest humanistic potential are remarkably refreshing. While most people expect extraordinary lessons from world leaders, renowned scientists, Pulitzer Prize winners or gifted artists, sometimes our greatest teachers simply walk among us, for the most part unnoticed or unrecognized.

It never ceases to surprise me how the most valuable insights and solutions surface from some of the most unexpected places. That snowy Tuesday morning when I met them was no exception.

It was shortly after 8:00 am when they gathered together. Nonchalantly, they filed into the small room. It was a lackluster morning; there was nothing particularly exciting or unusual about to occur. The only thing out of the ordinary was the fact I was present to observe and interact with them. Otherwise it was simply a typical Tuesday morning.

Within a few minutes the last member of the group arrived. My presence didn't seem to affect them at all. Ready and willing to commence, they picked up their tools and nodded.

I'm certain they didn't understand the magnitude and the importance of what they were really doing that morning. Before me was a simple yet elegant approach for addressing one of the most frightening problems our society will ever face: school violence.

Actually they weren't government consultants, behavioral experts or medical professionals. Only one of them was a grown-up. The rest were 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> graders at Saegertown Elementary School. Their tools were basic instruments that had been in the school system for years. Their mentor was Jason Ashbaugh, a dedicated and charismatic music teacher.

And as he lifted his hands, a group transformation was immediately apparent. The room seemed to suddenly change as well. It was filled with smiles, delight and determination. It was as if the teacher literally turned on a switch.

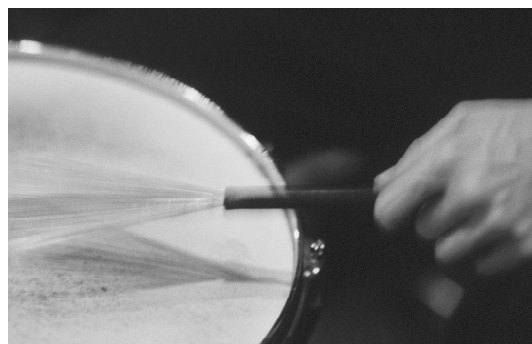
As their hands connected with those colorful Remo floor-standing hand drums, intricate rhythms flooded the corridors of the elementary school which had now

been transformed into an arena of jubilant creative expression. In seconds they were synergy in motion—a symphony of individuality and appreciation for one another.

Their rhythms were upbeat and lively. Their focus was intent yet relaxed. Their sense of pride was obvious. And their music was no less than fascinating.

Through eye contact, expressive nods and rhythmic nuances, the group gelled on many levels. Few words were spoken, yet communication through self and group expression told a powerful story about our greatest human potential to work together in harmony.

As quickly as the session began, it came to a close; thirty minutes



seemed to pass in just a few heartbeats. As hands lifted from instruments, each child took a deep sigh and nodded at their teacher. His gentle smile and

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warm expression conveyed a simple yet apparent affirmation of pride each child immediately recognized. As sighs turned to smiles, success reverberated throughout the room.

Then I had the chance to speak with them. Each question revealed more than I expected. The following seven insights emerged:

1. The opportunity to get together and play the drums is a privilege.
2. While love of music resounds as a common theme, the children love their teacher even more.
3. Even at a young age, the stress reduction benefits of playing drums together are universally understood and appreciated by the children.
4. Making music is simply a delightful way to begin a new day.
5. Drumming together is a great reason for getting out of bed and coming to school each day.
6. Drumming is fun!
7. A sense of togetherness and belonging is needed.

As one girl proudly stated, "We're one happy family."

As I drove back to my office that snowy morning, images of the children, their music and their teacher (truly an "unsung hero," pardon the pun) warmed my soul. It wasn't the activity that moved me as much as their lessons for all of us.

Jason Ashbaugh, an elementary school music teacher in western Pennsylvania, shows us that combining one's love for children with opportunities for recreational music-making builds bridges on solid foundations of camaraderie, caring, nurturing and creative expression. I refer to their activity as "recreational" but not for an obvious reason. According to Merriam Webster, it is derived from the word, "recreatio," which actually means "restoration to health."

If every child in our nation began each day with an interactive program that taught tolerance, respect and appreciation for one another, perhaps Columbine would have been no more than an ordinary town in Colorado. Isn't it time we worked together to preserve and restore the health of our nation's children?

While you might be convinced that recreational music-making cannot be fit into every child's schedule, I beg to differ. For Jason's group doesn't meet on occasion. Drumming together is available every school day (it has for the last 5 years) thanks to an extraordinary teacher, a dedicated principal and a model school system willing to enable its children to express the music of their hearts as one happy family—Mind Over Matter!

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*Dr. Barry Bittman, MD is a neurologist, author, international speaker, award-winning producer/director and inventor. As CEO and Medical Director of the Mind-Body Wellness Center, Dr. Bittman has pioneered a new paradigm for treating the "whole person." Based upon extensive research, he developed "Insights for Living Beyond Cancer" with Bernie Siegel, MD, a program that integrates the power of mind, body and spirit with conventional medical care. Dr. Bittman has also created similar programs for individuals facing the challenges of asthma, cardiovascular disease, chronic lung disease and diabetes. His medical perspectives, emphasizing a mind-body approach have been presented in his book, Reprogramming Pain, written to help individuals transform pain and suffering into health and success. His latest book, Maze of Life, co-authored with Anthony DeFail, is a soul-searching parable about restoring hope, meaning and purpose amidst life's challenges. As the host of the first nationally-syndicated integrative medicine weekly Public Radio program "Mind-Body Matters," Dr. Bittman interviewed 115 of the world's leading visionaries. Dr. Bittman has been awarded three patents for his invention, Mindscope®, introduced in 1992 as the world's first clinical tool linking the nervous system to a multimedia environment. Bittman's innovative biofeedback technology has been successfully utilized in clinical settings throughout the U.S., Canada and Europe. Based on his conviction that Recreational Music-making is an effective therapeutic strategy in conventional medical settings, Dr. Bittman led a team of researchers who investigated the biological effects of the HealthRHYTHMS group drumming protocol he co-developed. This foundational study (Alternative Therapies, January 2001) correlates group drumming with increased activity of Natural Killer cells, specialized white blood cells that seek out and destroy cancer cells and virally-infected cells. His recent research (Advances in Mind-Body Medicine, November 2003) demonstrated substantial reductions in burnout and mood disturbances in long-term care workers, as well as significant cost savings using a Recreational Music-making protocol.*