

## **JAM (Junior Appalachian Musicians)**

Sparta School, Alleghany County Schools, Sparta, North Carolina

**Category:** Afterschool; Cultural Understanding

At the start of the new millennium, music had all but disappeared from the halls of Alleghany County's elementary schools. Due to funding cuts and hard choices, none of the kindergartners through eighth graders in Alleghany County except the band members had the chance to learn anything about music. Sure there was music in the county itself, but it too was dying out: fiddles and banjos were shoved under beds to consort with dust mice.

Guidance counselor and musician Helen White was also aware of the growing state and national recognition that we need quality afterschool programs for our children. (Ask anyone at the North Carolina Center for After School Programs, located in Raleigh and established by the Public School Forum of North Carolina. They'll certainly agree.) So Helen found the perfect solution: matching local old-time musicians with elementary school kids to pass on the traditions and keep the music alive.

And thus the JAM (Junior Appalachian Musicians) afterschool program was born.

JAM began as part of Mountaineer Millennium, a 21st Century Community Learning Center based at Sparta Elementary School. "We had money left over because we didn't know how to spend money," says Jean Sparks, director of Mountaineer Millennium. So Helen and Jean figured out a brilliant way to spend that money. They bought fiddles, guitars, dulcimers, banjos, mandolins, and a bass. The response to the chance to learn music after school was terrific, so enthusiastic that in the early days it was not uncommon for Jean to come across two to three kids gathered around each guitar. "One would play the neck, one would string the bottom and the other would stand impatiently waiting to touch something."

Now all they needed was someone with the energy and passion for old-time music to run the program. They found their director, Lujean Keeper, in an unexpected place: working in the Sparta Elementary cafeteria and driving a school bus. "I knew Lujean was a fantastic folk artist—and she was washing forks in the school kitchen," says Jean Sparks.

At first Lujean was skeptical. "I don't know if the kids will like it. All I do is bluegrass," she said. The kids, modern despite living in fairly isolated circumstances in the mountains, were a little skeptical themselves. They wanted to know, "When are we going to play something besides them old songs Lujean likes?" But Lujean's music, the music of their mountain heritage, grew on them. As parent volunteer Kate Irwin says, "They started out very nonchalant about their instruments. When the second semester came along, they felt very important and possessive about them. 'This is how you hold it. This is where you touch it.'"

"It makes you have something to work for," says Erin Morrison, a teenage fiddler who has been with JAM for four years. "You hear about people who are stars and you want to practice and get better to be like them."

It's not just the music. JAM has transformed the lives of these kids, the ways they interact. "One girl, when she came to us, she would not hardly speak to anyone. She had problems at home and no self-confidence," says Lujean. "A beautiful child, but you could tell she was hurting. Now she's extremely outgoing, MVP for her softball team. Her grades are good and she's going to college. I'd like to think JAM had something to do with it."

Everyone involved with JAM has a favorite success story. Jean Sparks says, "We had a little girl, she was so introverted she wouldn't speak if she was on fire. At her grandmother's birthday, she stood up and played 'Happy Birthday' in front of fifty people." Helen White speaks of another kid, who had generally had a hard time with school, but was a star in JAM. When everyone was dragging injured cat sounds out of their instruments, this kid got a clear, pure note from his bass, stunning the entire room of JAM participants into a silence followed by spontaneous applause.

"I think there's a lot of emphasis put on sports. A lot of people warm the bench. But in music you can make progress. Anybody can be good if you practice. We have kids who haven't been good at much, but here they find their niche," says Kate Irwin, parent volunteer. Now some families have family nights, when everyone gets together to play music. Did they do that before JAM? "Not at all," Lujean says. Kids are making connections with their grandparents, bringing in instruments that once belonged to grandmas or great-grandpas. The community now speaks a musical language everyone can understand, a language passed on from the old folks to the young ones.

JAM draws on the talents of accomplished local musicians to instill an appreciation of musical cultural traditions and ensure that these traditions will continue into the next generation. JAM's instructors are acclaimed traditional musicians from the area, from dulcimer player Nancy Tuggle, who has won awards at numerous fiddlers' conventions, to Steve

Kilby, first place winner at Galax and Fiddler's Grove. The staff also includes a recording artist who plays mandolin; an award-winning bass player; a singer, songwriter, mandolin player and fiddler; and an expert in clawhammer banjo and old-time fiddle.

"This area had a real strong tradition of music after you plowed the fields," observes one of the musicians. All those people we read about in history books were picking and strumming. Thomas Jefferson played music. Patrick Henry was something of a fiddler. Ben Franklin picked a little guitar. But a tradition is no good unless it's passed along. Music helps to "keep some of the older values intact, such as trusting people and relying on people and keeping a sense of community together."

In 2002-2003, the rules for federal funding changed and Mountaineer Millennium could no longer provide nearly as much financial support for JAM. So Lujean, Helen and Jean took a long hard look at their program and decided to not just make it an independent program but also to revise it, to link it more closely with the curriculum. Now JAM is developing a curriculum guide that addresses the North Carolina Standard Course of Study. Enrichment classes in flatfoot dancing, ear training, music theory and music history augment what the children are learning about playing their instruments. And Mountaineer Millennium continues to support JAM in every way it still can. Everyone agrees that the program is much richer because of the adjustments they've made. "Now I think we have a structure that's good for the long haul," says Helen White.

"We have a unique opportunity here at the school due to some people who think things other than 'Can I go home now?' These folks think of what would be good for the children," says Jean Sparks. JAM has taken hold in Alleghany County, and is spreading from Sparta Elementary all over the state. The North Carolina Arts Council now sponsors a statewide special initiative which supports JAM programs modeled after the Alleghany program in five other western North Carolina counties: Surry, Ashe, Haywood, Graham and Swain, with intentions of expanding it to other areas in the state.

JAMmers have performed at the renowned Fiddler's Grove Fiddlers' Convention and the Fishers Peak Traditional Music Interpretive Center on the Blue Ridge Parkway, as well as other festivals and sites. Helen, Jean and Lujean have accepted invitations from as far away as New Orleans and San Francisco to show people how to duplicate what they do. As Kate Irwin puts it, "The magic of this program is kids playing with other kids. It's not competitive. Everybody pulls together without singling anyone out." And Jean adds, "We want it to be fun."

**NC Center for Afterschool Programs:** [www.nccap.net](http://www.nccap.net)

**21st Century Community Learning Center:** [www.ncpublicschools.org/schoolimprovement/alternative/21cclc/](http://www.ncpublicschools.org/schoolimprovement/alternative/21cclc/)

**NC Standard Course of Study at NC Public Schools:** [www.ncpublicschools.org](http://www.ncpublicschools.org)