

## Hillsdale instructor introduces students to ukulele



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JEROMESVILLE — Andrew Lewellen wanted to share his love of music with his students, and now he has a whole ukulele choir with whom he can share his passion and skills.

The gifted coordinator at Hillsdale Middle School came up with the idea for the fifth-grade choir after several students asked him to show them

chords while he played in his classroom, something he decided “they could do as a class.”

“It’s been during recess because it’s just purely for people who are interested,” Lewellen said. “It had to be a time where they could just pop in when something else wasn’t demanded of them.”

Roughly 15 students play with the ukulele choir, including those who have previous musical experience and others who have never touched an instrument before.

**Twenty-five ukuleles were provided by a \$740 grant Lewellen wrote for through the Ashland County Community Foundation.** And while they are not required to do so, the students also are able to take their instruments home to practice, which happened frequently, to Lewellen’s surprise.

“I like Mr. Lewellen, so ... I just thought it’d be really fun because there’s usually not that much stuff that’s just fun because it’s just school,” said fifth-grader Riley Wagner.

Fellow fifth-grader Nicholas Smith was inspired to join the ukulele choir because of his own love of music and involvement in band.

“I didn’t really have trouble (learning), I just kind of watched,” Smith said. Lewellen agreed Smith was “pretty quick” to pick up the instrument.

“When we first started, I don’t think anyone was really that good except Mr. Lewellen, but I think most of us caught on pretty fast,” said Landon Thomas.

With its informal format, the students teach each other alongside Lewellen during the sessions every Monday and Thursday.

The students already have played in two performances, which include theatrics to accompany them, and are scheduled to perform at the Bluebell Festival of the Arts in Jeromesville on May 18.

While students are not required to perform, the experience provides them a chance to conquer stage fright and practice performing in front of others. Several students even braved solo performances with Lewellen’s help.

“He made (me) feel better when I was doing it,” Smith said. “It was hard to do it in front of everybody when you’re the only one out there.”

Teachers and staff have expressed support for the choir and interest has even spread to family members. Troy Bennett said he decided to join the ukulele choir because his dad played guitar, but his father has since switched to ukulele as well because of his son’s involvement.

“When you start something, you’re never quite sure what’s going to happen,” Lewellen said. “I want it to be a place where people could come just to relax and enjoy each other’s company.”

So far, the students have learned songs like “Wipe Out,” “Stand By Me,” “Baby Shark” and “Red River Valley.”

Lewellen plans to extend the program to sixth-grade students next year so the current fifth-grade students can continue to improve their skills.

“If these kids are still interested in five, six years when they get to the high school, that would be great,” Lewellen said. “This is something that they can do forever, their whole life, so I’d be happy if they continued it on their own.”



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