

FINDING YOUR RESILIENCE

How to meet the challenges of change — over and over again

BY CARLA KALOGERIDIS

Music teachers have been challenged by pandemic-inspired changes — perhaps more so than most educators. Teaching other academic classes virtually — or in-person, socially distanced, and with masks — is much less complicated than what a music teacher must achieve with voices separated and covered, and instruments adapted for safer playing but less-than-ideal performance.

But this isn't a woe-is-me article. I think we can all agree that won't help music teachers or their students. Quite frankly, while we all hoped and optimistically planned for a back-to-normal school year, it is what it is. And what it is, is changing constantly.

So how do you find strength to sustain your music program during challenging times? Perhaps there's no better way to learn resiliency than from people who dig deep for it every single day.

LEARN TO ADAPT

David Nabb knows about resiliency. On February 26, 2000, he had a major stroke that for a time left him unable to sit up, speak, use his left hand, walk, or even swallow.

"It was a terrifying experience," says Nabb, professor of music at the University of Nebraska at Kearney where he teaches woodwind instruments and music history to undergraduate and graduate students. "The stroke came with no warning. I was 37, active, and had been in excellent health."

Once the shock of the situation lessened a bit, Nabb told himself, "This is tough, but it's not going to deter

my resilience to find my way back." A few years later, he returned to his position at the university, performing and teaching with a one-handed toggle-key saxophone. As challenging as the experience has been, Nabb finds himself drawing on those lessons of resiliency now in the frustration of teaching during a pandemic (see sidebar on page 26, "Takeaways from a Personal Crisis").



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— DAVID NABB

Takeaways from a Personal Crisis

Here's some wisdom from David Nabb about how to face the challenge of uncertainty:

- 1. Keep in mind that we are human, and humans adapt to change.** In fact, we are quite good at it. Our ability to adapt is perhaps the most salient feature of our species.
- 2. Recognize that adapting is difficult.** Don't be surprised when things get frustrating. We can do this, although it may be painful and disorienting.
- 3. Use your critical-thinking skills.** That means wiping the slate clean and starting the thought process over from the beginning, even if it's difficult and inconvenient. In Nabb's case, just because nobody had ever played and taught professional classical saxophone literature on a one-handed saxophone did not mean it could not be done.
- 4. Question everything.** Abandon your assumptions and re-think everything.
- 5. Just because you have always done things a certain way does not mean that is the only path to success.** After the stroke, Nabb had to move on from his beloved conventional two-handed saxophone and dedicate himself to a new one-handed saxophone mechanism. It was a decades-long process that involved brainstorming what to do; consulting with instrument builder Jeff Stelling on the instrument's design and construction; and studying the capabilities of the toggle-key mechanism that Stelling developed and learning how to play it. Nabb says this process continues today with his own practice and study. In his words: "I'm still adjusting."
- 6. Avoid nostalgia.** Pining for the "good old days" is just not helpful. Those days are over. Look forward. Be welcoming to completely new ideas.

"My university started this semester without a mask mandate, and we've all been concerned," Nabb says. "As teachers, we feel responsible for decisions in our classrooms. We are all trying to remain mindful of the welfare of our students and our responsibilities to the community."

Nabb knows from experience that in a situation like this, getting frustrated isn't going to change things anyway. "When things in your environment are fouled up, your own actions and decisions are crucial," he says. "You have to adapt. You have to stay on your feet. I love my subject matter, so I keep focused on what I can control. Instead of fixating on how things used to be or how I'd like them to be, I focus on personal goals for the students."

When he feels frustrated, Nabb reminds himself that no matter how tough things are on him as the teacher, it is the students who are really suffering. "Students are concerned. They want to remain proactive learners while contributing to a solution," he says.

During the pandemic, Nabb has adapted his teaching methodologies — but not the musical goals. The technology-based methodologies are working, and he is grateful for the vast improvements in technology that have made this kind of learning possible.

"My instrumental classes are going much better than I expected," he says, "but they are still an enormous challenge for me and the students. It's the uncertainty of everything that gets to me." Even with his daily personal challenges and increasing cases of COVID at the university, Nabb says "there is still really good stuff going on."

"I have students I love and who love me," he says. "I try to set an example for them with my own resilience. If teachers respond to what's happening with anger and self-pity, our behavior will rub off on the students. They will

soak it up. We have to show them that the key to happiness is learning to be grateful."

FIND PURPOSE

Expressing gratitude has shepherded Sarah Van Dusen through tragedy as well. Several years ago, a large fire consumed a neighboring town and left 50,000 people homeless in four hours. The fire advanced the length of a football field per second, and many lost their lives because they couldn't escape. Even several months after the fire, the people in her community had no lights, no water, and no homes.

Van Dusen was teaching beginning band and had a displaced family living with her. Classes were taking place in the local mall. "It was a terrible mixture of joy and sadness — joy that I wasn't a victim and sadness for those who died," she recalls.

And then it was time for the regularly scheduled orchestra concert, and she found herself thinking, "What's the point?" But the concert went forward as planned, beginning with the conductor calling the town's first responders to the stage while he played a little march that he had written.

"Everyone was crying, and there was a four-minute standing ovation," she remembers. "Music has an important role immediately after a crisis. I was so wrong."

Though the tragedy of the fire is different from what's happening now with COVID, Van Dusen finds many similarities in how she's coping with it. Music has inspired resiliency during the pandemic and continues to motivate communities to find their way forward. "After the fire, music gave purpose to music educators and a sense of normalcy," she says. "Now I think, 'Crisis? I should make music. I'm a music teacher.'"

The entire experience led Van Dusen to conduct her own research and write about how music motivates a community after tragedy. She interviewed five music educators affected

by the fire. They all talked about how music allowed them to thank the helpers, create new memories, share experiences, celebrate, and grieve. With what she's learned, Van Dusen thinks NAFME could put together a Crisis Committee that can help organize responses and resources when music teachers are faced with hardship resulting from a tragedy.

"When you put on a performance during a crisis, you need local and distant support," she says. "You need people to help coordinate the effort so that those affected get what they really need."

Van Dusen has found that lessons learned from music-making after the fire have helped sustain her through the challenges of teaching in a pandemic. "The way to get through this

is to put aside your expectations," she says. "It's not a regular school year, and that's okay. Also, there's a lot to be said for making space for the emotional side of how the pandemic is affecting us all."

Yes, there are limitations, but Van Dusen recharges by helping students build a relationship to music that will last them the rest of their lives. "I find resiliency by finding a purpose for creating the music," she says. "Find something to hope for, something to keep you busy. All that momentum is helpful."

Van Dusen is trying to help other teachers who simply don't have the time to figure out their path forward. "We hope that things will get back to normal soon, but it's not clear yet what that new normal is," she says.



Share your lesson plans with other teachers, share strategies, use your social media connections.

You aren't alone. Somebody, somewhere has the idea you need.

— SARAH VAN DUSEN

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"It's important to remember that you don't have to do it all yourself," she concludes. "Share your lesson plans with other teachers, share strategies, use your social media connections. You aren't alone. Somebody, somewhere has the idea you need."

FOCUS ON FUN

Eliél Freer-Sullivan was born and raised in Brazil. While in music school there, he won a jazz competition and was awarded the opportunity to study in the United States for a semester. A few months before he was scheduled to leave, Freer-Sullivan discovered that because he didn't speak English, he would not be permitted to go. He told the scholarship department he would learn English in two months. He put sticky notes with the English word on everything in his house. He also volunteered to host an American student, which helped accelerate his learning. He learned enough to get the approval to study abroad.

Freer-Sullivan arrived at Georgia State in Atlanta, and even though the community embraced him, he barely spoke English and it was very hard taking classes. "I was also struggling with my sexual orientation," he says, "so I was exploring and trying to find myself."

When the semester finished, he returned home and came out to his parents about his homosexuality. "They kicked me out of the house," he says. "It was very unexpected." Desperate and with no place to live, he reached back out to his host family in the United States. The couple found a way to get him back and legally adopt him. Freer-Sullivan auditioned for the music school at Georgia State and started over with his degree in music education.

"I lost the three years of education credits that I had already done in Brazil, but it was the best decision to return to the States," he says. He did four more years at Georgia State, started dating, and got acclimated to a new culture.

In his last semester, he was teaching music part-time at a private children's school in Atlanta. The music teacher he was working under had a baby and decided not to return. Although Freer-Sullivan did not have his degree yet or much teaching experience, the school liked what it saw and offered him the job teaching general music for grades K-8. Collaborating with Georgia State, the school allowed him to teach full-time, get paid, and finish up his degree. "It was stressful, but a dream come true," he says.

Although Freer-Sullivan's young life had challenged his resiliency many times, the biggest challenge was yet to come. After a couple years teaching, the pandemic hit. Like everyone else, his school went virtual in spring 2020. In August 2020, the day before returning to campus, Freer-Sullivan heard noises outside his loft apartment. Looking out his window, he saw something tragic happening to someone in the street. He ran downstairs and called the police, but by the time he got there, the victim and attackers had disappeared.

"The police came but they didn't believe me," he says. "And the security camera wasn't working."

The next day at school, Freer-Sullivan had an anxiety attack and had to leave. "I couldn't eat, drive, or work," he says. "I lost 27 pounds and had to go on short-term disability. What I had seen terrified me, and I couldn't seem to shake it. The trauma was so big that I was afraid of everything. I was afraid of myself."

In October, he returned to the classroom but because of the COVID-19 pandemic, there was no music teaching or singing. The school gave him other responsibilities and he was very busy, but he needed a musical outlet. Freer-Sullivan experimented with recording himself singing and found "cool things" to do with the kids virtually, including making rap music and remixing choir songs as hip hop pieces.



All we have is today. It's the only thing you really have. So, forget about your crazy expectations, and just focus on the music and the students and have fun.

— ELIÉL FREER-SULLIVAN

"I thought, 'How can I teach what I need to teach without instruments and singing?' I had to embrace the technology." His ideas were so well received that he soon had 100% student involvement, about 380 kids a week. Freer-Sullivan and the students used iPads and GarageBand to create TV commercials, podcasts, and songs. The school got licenses for the Soundtrap app so that students could explore further.

"Everyone from 4th grade up was producing music," he says. "It opened up a whole new world, and I enjoyed myself so much that I am planning to go back and get my master's in music technology and production."

With the new school year now underway, Freer-Sullivan has a music room, guitars, and ukuleles. He teaches 10 students at a time, and they stand apart, wear masks, and avoid singing. "The kids actually miss the things we were doing when it was virtual," he says. "They were more engaged. They have started recording themselves and producing music again."

Even though he's doing better now, the 27-year-old Freer-Sullivan says the trauma he witnessed altered his

whole life. "I've tried medications, I've tried everything," he says. "Deep breathing, yoga, and mindfulness exercises are the only things that help."

When a panic attack comes in the middle of the day, he focuses on living only that moment. "I notice the sights, sounds, smells, and tastes around me," he explains. "I slow down and think about the basics: 'You love music. You love people.'"

His advice for music teachers who are struggling to keep their programs going in these trying weeks and months ahead is just to sit down and have a good time with the kids. "Making music in a pandemic can be fun," he says. "All we have is today. It's the only thing you really have. So, forget about your crazy expectations, and just focus on the music and the students and have fun."

"In the end, whatever is going on at school is usually not a big deal," he concludes. "It's stressful. It's hard. It's not an easy journey, but it's not a big deal when you stick to the basics of having fun."

SEE THE GOOD

Teaching music virtually was challenging enough — but what if your students are blind or deaf? For the last 18 years, Julie Novak Harrison has taught K–12 music education and served as the music therapist at the Colorado School for the Deaf and Blind. Out of about 160 students, 75 are in her music program.

"This is going to sound strange, but I had taken on so much and put so many things on my plate, that the pandemic was actually a blessing in some ways," she says. "When things slowed down, it was almost a relief. The pandemic was a restart for me. I did miss the inspiration of being in person with the kids, but I knew I couldn't keep going with the way things were."

Teaching Deaf students via Zoom required strong determination. "It was very challenging because Deaf



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— JULIE NOVAK HARRISON

students learn through vibration and kinesthetic movement, and that's hard to do online," Harrison explains. "They lost all of that, and I really struggled. I tried to create lessons that were more about genres and analyzing deaf performers."

Eventually, she figured out ways to communicate musical concepts on camera. "A quarter note was represented by hitting my chest. An eighth note was clapping." She and the students worked through it together.

The students from the School for the Blind dramatically increased their technology skills during the pandemic, learning music editing and production with GarageBand. "The pandemic helped me see the possibilities," she says.

And yet, all the uncertainty continued to weigh on her. "Nothing was ever firm. Any plans included the qualifier, 'if things work out.' We'd be planning a concert, and I had to tell the kids, 'Work really hard and maybe this concert will actually happen.' The kids and I have learned to decide if something is really worth our time because nothing is ever definite."

Through the challenges of the last two years, Harrison says she has learned a few things. "I learned flex-

ibility. I learned to express gratitude for the small things and to show appreciation to parents and others who contribute positively to our program."

She started keeping a gratitude journal, making a note of something good that happens each day. "When I get discouraged, I go back and read through it," she says. "It helps me remember that there's lots of good happening, too."

She also finds inspiration on social media, looking at what other teachers are producing and what technologies they are using. "When I opened my mind, I couldn't believe all I could accomplish with technology."

Back to school now and wearing masks, Harrison is implementing what she learned, including the importance of finding work-life balance. "The pandemic reminded us that there should be a balance," she says. "Your new normal must be balanced. Instead of overloading myself, we will do one production a year, and the rest will be videos. And guess what? The parents and the administration are very happy with that. I discovered that all the pressure I was feeling before the pandemic was self-imposed."

Her wisdoms for teachers who may be struggling? "I encourage a sense of humor," she says. "See the joy, not the problems. The kids are beautiful. They are amazing. We have beautiful moments all the time — even in a pandemic. Think about the difference you are making in your kids' lives." ■



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