



## Welcome to America,

By Marty Steiner

# You are Welcome Here!

Buffalo, New York is known for many things, including Buffalo Wings that are rapidly replacing the hot dog as the All-American food at baseball games and other sporting events. In [my home-base of] Moultrie, Georgia, the director of the local sports rehabilitation center (a Buffalo native) proudly displays his signed Buffalo Bills football and helmet.

But in a home in West Buffalo, there is simple and modest pride about their daughter being the “cover girl” of the issue of August *SBO*. Mu Lwe Than’s parents are from Burma. They immigrated here seeking the opportunity for their daughter to receive a quality education and be able to live a meaningful life.

*SBO*’s attention was drawn to the Buffalo String Works (BSW) while researching the recent PlayUSA grant recipients. The short BSW description as a PlayUSA grant recipient described in that August *SBO* only scratched the surface of this group that exemplifies and supports the deep-rooted American attitude of “Welcome to America, you *are* welcome here.”

The BSW website begins with a statement from family practitioner, Dr. Kim Griswold: “For refugee children from around the world, BSW offers a means of expression that transcends the spoken word. Music and a sense of belonging are powerful supports for children learning about a new culture.” A portion of Griswold’s family practice is to provide family care to “refugee and immigrant populations seeking asylum”.

Griswold is also a link to other significant immigrant and refugee serving groups in Buffalo. The greater Buffalo area is the largest center of resettled refugees and asylum seekers in New York and is among the largest in the nation.

In addition to BSW there is the Western New York Center for Survivors of Torture, it is estimated that 15,000 of Buffalo’s immigrant population are torture survivors. Some of these are the very parents, families, and neighbors of the students served by BSW.

What does it take to successfully launch a non-profit, music education-based effort that can be life-changing and community impacting? A successful effort requires abandoning a “them and us” attitude. Passion, relationships, and collaboration are the characteristics usually found in most successful endeavors. This is especially true when music is the common denominator.

The inspiration for BSW came from the simple and direct question from one of Elise Alaimo’s students after an in classroom mini concert in Spring of 2014. Elise is the music teacher at Buffalo’s International School #45. This school has 1100 students from 70 countries speaking 40 languages. To accomplish this school’s stated mission of, “International School #45 supports a global multicultural perspective that fosters understanding and acceptance of diversity among students and staff, everything acknowledges the broad spectrum of their student’s native backgrounds. Even the school’s website is available in seven non-English languages!

That simple question of “When can we play?” triggered a response from two of the mini-concert violin performers, Yuki Numata Resnick and Virginia Barron. Joining with the teacher, Elise Alaimo, they located violins, found a few generous supporters to cover start-up expenses and launched BSW that next September, only four months after their inspiration. BSW began as a two day a week after school program.

Megan McDevitt is the Associate Director of BSW. Like Yuki and Virginia, she is an accomplished concert musician who found her way to Buffalo through marriage to a professional musician. She understands the dynamics of a young child being inspired by music and by an instrument. Starting on violin in the fourth grade she was later encouraged to pick a second instrument. She then picked the bass, saying “it was big...and cool!” Today she performs on bass, especially in the “new” music genre and is BSW’s primary bass instructor.

Megan had previously worked with the Young Musicians in California. She brought that experience to Buffalo and to

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BSW. In working with the administrative side of BSW as well as being the bass teacher, she commented about the active inclusion of the student's parents. "This year we met individually with each student musician's parents. When necessary, we included translators or interpreters to assist. We wanted these parents to fully understand the BSW program. One result was that we added some of these parents as volunteer translators and others that now are providing transportation for students with no other way to classes or performances," she said, quickly adding, "We expect to expand the active involvement of parents and families in the future!"

This month begins BSW's sixth year of service. In September 2014 the doors opened to seventeen violin students with four teachers and three assistants. This fall there are 85 students studying violin, viola, cello and bass with a teaching staff of 16 teachers and 15 teaching assistants. In addition, there are a dozen regular volunteers with that number growing.

Other changes over these first years include increasing the teaching program just this fall from two to three days of after school classes each week. These classes operate for two hours each of those days with two, back-to-back, one-hour sessions. Classes are conducted at Buffalo's Dream Center, a community church that shares its entire building space with a variety of community serving groups. This facility is close to both of the schools which have a concentration of the refugee and immigrant students.

SBO spoke with violin teacher Evan Courtin about these changes and the challenges that BSW and its teachers face with possible future growth. Evan Courtin has been a violin teacher with BSW since the very beginning. He started studying violin when he



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## Feature

was five years old so he has a personal appreciation for the value of early music education. Courtin has introduced music theory classes this year at BSW. Now equipped with his MBA, he also teaches privately at a Buffalo studio.

The impetus for increasing the number of teaching assistants in the classrooms was specifically to provide a training ground for aspiring music educators. "It is important that the people working in our BSW community are provided the tools, skills and experience to expand and grow similar programs wherever their careers will take them," offered Yuki. To that point, she added that three of the teaching assistants became BSW staff teachers before moving on to full time teaching positions in western New York public schools. One also continues as a BSW teacher one day a week.

Dozens of volunteers perform tasks ranging from graphic design, non-profit consulting services to office tasks and food related chores. Among these volunteers are many high school and college students with plans to become music educators gaining valuable



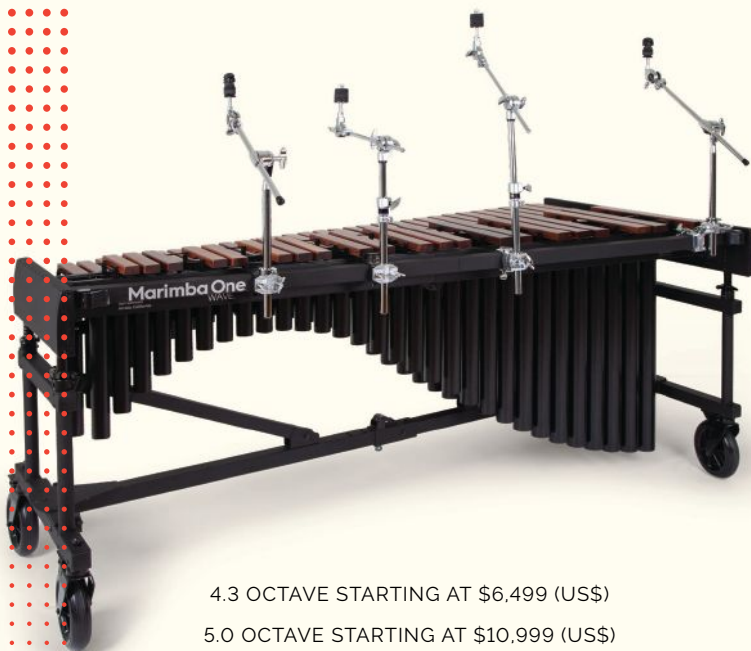
classroom experience that may not necessarily be available in their formal curriculum.

So, what might the Buffalo String Works efforts mean to the overall world of music? A little more than a century ago the Balines, a Russian-Jewish family fleeing Czarist persecution, arrived in New York City. Their five-year-old son, Israel, took to the streets as a singer/dancer and also performed as a singing waiter in Chinatown. Later, after becoming a U.S. citizen and serving in our Army during WWI, he developed a strong sense of patriotism for his new country. He began composing tunes and writing lyrics. A misspelling of his name as "I. Berlin" on a published

sheet music eventually evolved into Irving Berlin. This immigrant child would live 101 years and create over 1250 songs, including musicals, many with deep patriotic American themes, such as "God Bless America"!

There just might be a future Irving Berlin among the immigrant children in Buffalo that are learning and growing at the Buffalo String Works! Learn more at [buffalostringworks.org](http://buffalostringworks.org).

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