TOUCHPOINT

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The Mission of Success and the Success of the Mission

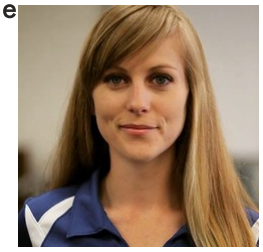
...from the diary of Megan Couey

by Erin Cole

In all walks of life, there are "good days" and "not-so-good days." When it appears there is no possible resolution to the situation we are facing, we *do* have a choice. Either we walk away from the challenge or we embrace it with the knowledge and confidence we *can* make a difference if we refuse to turn our backs on the uphill climb ahead.

The following article is a remarkable example of the immeasurable value of PERSISTENCE or, if you will, a personal decision to "GIVE UP GIVING UP." KUDOS to Megan Couey for sharing her inspirational story. It offers much hope to all of us!

-Tim Lautzenheiser



Megan Couey graduated college in December of 2012, and she was in the classroom by mid-January. While this is not typical, it was a situation that occurred after a music teacher at a Florida Title 1 elementary school suffered an accident keeping her out of the classroom for most of the school year. Megan heard about the unfortunate set of circumstances from one of her college professors, and she decided to step in. Megan's ideal position would have been to teach middle or high school instrumental music, but she saw this as an opportunity to get her foot in the door.

Megan's first task was to create an elementary music curriculum to ensure the program would be up to state standards. This would have been a challenge for any first-year teacher, but was even more difficult given it was a specialized school that included students on the autism spectrum, deaf/hard of hearing, as well as other special needs. Megan also had to endure additional challenges including students with major behavioral problems, those who just wanted

their old music teacher back, and a significant number of the 4th-5th graders who were just reluctant to play, dance or sing. Megan adds, "Nothing about that job was easy. Every day was a challenge, and admittedly, I cried a lot. It was hard work, but it helped prepare me for the next step in my career as a music educator."

Two years after taking the elementary music job, Megan accepted a high school band position at a Title 1 school in Pensacola, Florida. When she arrived on site, it didn't take long for her to see the kind of challenges she would face with the students. Many of the students' families lived at-or-below the poverty level, there was no shortage of disheartening family situations, and many students were struggling with a great deal in their personal lives. Teachers in schools like this often do so much more than teach the given discipline; they are guidance counselors, they watch for signs of any form of abuse, they may even feed and clothe some of the students. Megan commented, "Sometimes the victories were as simple as getting the child to school or receiving a hello or hug in the hallway from a difficult student. Those two years took a physical toll on Megan. She endured several hospital visits for chronic stomach pains and even lost some of her hair from the stress, all because of the experienced high-stress level. Megan said, "It was the longest 24 months of my life, but I wanted those kids to have someone to trust. I refused to give up or give in."

As she approached the end of her first year, Megan considered leaving the school, but a student with autism, Allen Fink, changed her mind. She ultimately decided to stay so she could avail Allen to the very best Senior year band experience possible. Playing the trombone was Allen's passion - he played in the jazz band his junior year and joined the marching band and symphonic band his Senior year. He performed at the District Concert Music Performance Assessment, and his performance at the Solo & Ensemble Festival awarded him a superior rating! This was *the* goal he had dreamed about the entire year.

Megan Couey & Allen Fink
Receiving his Solo & Ensemble Medal

VIDEO: *Angels in Our Midst - The Story of Allen and Jordan* (drum major)

Megan adds, "I saw the work to rebuild that program as my mission. While you may be thinking you would never accept a job of this nature, the described scenario is more common than you might realize." Megan clearly was carrying a lot on her shoulders. After so much stress mentally and physically, Megan kept pushing. Her missionary spirit was the driving force, and the students were the benefactors of her persistence. Many would throw-up their hands, convince themselves they should not be part of the profession and walk away. Megan's experience offers survival tools for other directors to "stay the course" and start the journey to the creation-and-growth of a worthy program.

Here are a few tips from Megan to help cope with teaching in a challenging school environment:

- Find a teacher near you to lean-on; seek-out a respected, trusted mentor.
- Make friends with the people in your department. Your colleagues are your guides and supporters.
- Advocate for your program and its needs. Communicate to everyone the achievements happening in your band culture.
- Be aware of the importance of constant self-rejuvenation. Your teaching energy is derived from your personal health habits; they are primary.

Megan Couey is currently the director of bands at Holley-Navarre Middle School located outside of Pensacola, Florida. The school is in the Santa Rosa School District which happens to be the same district in which Megan grew up.

Holley-Navarre Middle School Band

Megan Couey, Director

Most people would have “thrown-in-the-towel” at the first sign of possible escape. Megan didn’t. What she meant to her students may never be measured, but for them to see her being so steadfast in her professional assignment (not to mention her personal fortitude) is an enormous and powerful lesson!

Erin Cole

Currently, Erin is an Educational Consultant for Conn-Selmer, Inc. and also an Educational Communications Specialist for their Division of Education. Previously, Erin Cole had a very successful career as the Director of Bands at Tapp Middle School in Cobb County Georgia for 22 years. Under her leadership, the Tapp Band had many honors included being selected to perform at the 58th annual Midwest Band and Orchestra Clinic in Chicago, Illinois in December of 2004. While at Tapp, Erin commissioned four pieces of music for the band including Robert W. Smith's "The Great Locomotive Chase", Frank Ticheli's "Simple Gifts – Four Shaker Songs". Samuel R. Hazo's "Ascend" and was part of a consortium of directors to commission Eric Whitacre's "The Seal Lullaby". Erin has written chapters for the popular GIA publication series Teaching Music Through Performance and is also currently a contributing editor for Hal Leonard's Essential Elements method book and interactive website team. Erin is currently in high demand as a guest conductor for honor and all-state bands across the country as well as a clinician and presenter for music conferences all over the world.

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