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Essay is instrumental for band

Beck Academy band director wins music room makeover

BY **CINDY LANDRUM**
staff writer

Beck Academy tuba player Aaron LeBrun sometimes has to stop in the middle of a song so he can pull up a stuck valve on the school's badly-dented tuba.

The school's timpani can't be tuned and the piano falls apart when the lid is closed.

At concert time, band director Heather Simon has to borrow instruments from nearby schools because her band doesn't have what many would consider basic equipment for a middle school band.

"The condition of my existing instruments, shall I say, is terrible," Simon wrote in the essay she entered in In Tune Monthly magazine's ultimate music room makeover contest.

Simon, who has been the school's band director for four years, thought she'd be one of the first 100 middle and high school teachers to enter, something that would have won the school a pair of Pro-Mark drumsticks.

She never thought she'd win the grand prize: \$25,000 of new instruments and music equipment.

"I've hit the lottery for band teachers," said Simon, who is in her fourth year as Beck's band director.

Simon said she received new music stands and chairs when Beck moved into its new school.

"The things that don't make music are new, but we need better instruments," she said. "The kids can only play as good as the instruments will let them."

Her yearly budget is \$550, enough to buy one reed per woodwind player or eight pieces of music. Because the money has to be spent each year, buying new instruments is almost impossible, she said.

"It would take me 50 years to get this band to the basic level, and that's only if I didn't buy any music, reeds or fixed any instruments," Simon said.

Hundreds of middle and high school band directors from across the country submitted essays.

Simon's stood out because she talked about the instruments she had to work with and how she wanted to start an after-school jazz band program, said Irwin Kornfield, the chief executive officer for In Tune magazine.

"The state of music education in this country is sad," he said. "There aren't



Heather Simon

MAKING MUSIC: Josh Bertelsman plays a saxophone that was part of the \$25,000 in instruments and equipment won by band director Heather Simon in an essay contest.

enough programs. There aren't enough instruments. There aren't enough teachers. I don't think as a country we realize how important music education is."

The school received three electric guitars, two amplifiers, a sound mixer, a Pearl drum kit, a euphonium, a professional trombone with "F" attachment, a professional tenor saxophone, an oboe and a clarinet keyed in "A," some music composition software and drumsticks and mallets.

"We thought it would be a good idea to contribute instruments that bands usually wouldn't have on their own," said Matt Vance from Buffet Crampon, one of five companies which donated equipment.

Simon said the new instruments are things the school would never be able to afford on its own.

The school has no band booster club, although a parent did donate some drums because the ones the school had were so bad. Last year, the band's lone fundraiser paid for a bus to take it to a competition at Carowinds, she said.

LeBrun said the new instruments will make a big difference.

"We'll sound better," he said. "We have to, with good instruments."

Contact Cindy Landrum at 679-1237 or clandrums@greenvillejournal.com.



NEW INSTRUMENTS: Beck Academy received three guitars, amplifiers, a microphone and a mixer from Peavy.

An essay worth \$25,000

Here's an excerpt from Heather Simon's winning essay in the In Tune Monthly magazine's music room makeover contest:

"The condition of my existing instruments is, shall I say, terrible. I have a tuba that is flat on one side (which alters the pitch 1/2 step too high), timpani that do not tune, and best of all, a piano that falls apart when you close the lid.

I am lacking several instruments that are vital in a middle school band: bass clarinet, tenor saxophone, xylophone, marimba, bassoon, oboe, and several auxiliary percussion instruments. When it comes to concert time, I have to borrow instruments from surrounding schools to have close to proper instrumentation.

During the move to the new school, several instruments were stolen by the movers: a flute, clarinet and an amplifier. These instruments did not have serial numbers so they cannot be traced. At Beck Academy, approximately 30 percent of students receive free and reduced meals. These are the students that I want to offer more opportunities to. Their parents cannot afford to buy or rent an instrument. However, we know that music has such a positive effect on students; these are the students we need to reach. I want to be able to include more of these students in my band program."