
For Teens, Message Is Music To Their Ears

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The Register-Guard

Published: Sunday, November 6, 2005

Three chords and the truth about living life on the edge resonated among a dozen at-risk teenagers Saturday at a former Eugene fire station now used as a shelter for homeless youths.

The Girlfriend Experience, an alternative rock band from San Francisco, performed a free concert for the young people at the Looking Glass Youth & Family Services' Station 7. The band followed its high-octane, high-volume performance with a 15-minute question-and-answer session. Band members - some of whom had their own troubled times as teens - spoke about building self-esteem, making appropriate life choices and turning to social service programs such as Looking Glass for help when needed.

Saturday's concert was sponsored by Acchord, a nonprofit organization that encourages musicians to use music in therapeutic ways. The event also featured a workshop and jam session in which young people got a chance to play with the band.

Nichoel Wright, 17, of Eugene, took her place behind a drum kit for the first time, as the band's lead vocalist, Tobias Hawkins III, taught her how to keep a basic rock beat.

"Don't think. See it. Feel it," Hawkins said. A few minutes later, Wright had a "breakthrough moment" after she stopped playing backward to the upbeat, he said.

Wright was impressed that the band took time to stop by the shelter. The group played there three months ago and decided to return during their West Coast tour, which included a Saturday night gig at Diablo's Downtown Lounge.

"It's like someone out there cares about you," said Wright, who has been coming to the shelter off and on for the past two years.

Shoehorned into a corner between a pool table, foosball table and a display of leftover firefighter gear from Station 7's days as a firehouse, The Girlfriend Experience belted out a rousing 40-minute set.

Hawkins fronts the year-old band, which includes James Maize on bass, Ty Gerhardt on guitar and Jeff Left on drums.

Left, who began playing drums in the sixth grade and later earned a business degree from Notre Dame University, encouraged the youths to lean on the staff at Looking Glass for support.

"There are good people in the world. Don't feel like you have to grow up to be 'normal' - continue to be yourself," he said.

Since 1970, Looking Glass has worked with troubled teens and their families. The agency serves 6,500 at-risk youths annually with 10 different programs that include counseling, substance abuse treatment, 24-hour crisis intervention, temporary shelter, education, vocational training and residential treatment.

For five years, the Acchord music mentorship program has matched at-risk teenagers with

volunteer musicians who give them lessons. After completing 10 lessons, the youths receive an instrument. To date, more than 600 lessons have been provided, and 18 youths have earned an instrument, Acchord program director Bob Clayton said.

"We use music as a way to establish dialog with youths. It gives them a positive experience with an adult," he said.

Band member Hawkins said he relates easily to the teenagers at Station 7, after a childhood filled with drugs and violence in Berkeley, Calif. His mother was savagely beaten with a hammer during a home invasion robbery, his father was a drug addict and Hawkins began taking drugs when he was 7, he said.

Addicted to crystal methamphetamine, Hawkins, now 45, has been drug-free for the past 18 months.

"Music saved my life, and I understand what a lot of these kids are going through," said Hawkins, who works as a supervisor at a Whole Foods market when he's not touring with the band.

"Music has the power to reach out to kids," he said. "We just want to give them inspiration and hope."