

# WHERE NO CHILD IS LEFT BEHIND

'Lead Guitar' brings music education to our nation's most impoverished young people

BY KAREN PETERSON



Lead Guitar co-founder Brad Richter conducts a lesson at Chicago Tech Academy High School.

**C**lassical guitarist and composer Brad Richter wasn't expecting what he found when he stopped by the high school in Page, a small city in Northern Arizona's Navajo country.

On tour, Richter had been asked to lead a master class for guitarists in Page High School's music program, and he had been advised that some of those young players were quite good. Richter had heard that before from other teachers at other schools he visited as a matter of course and curiosity when touring. From past experience, he was skeptical.

So imagine his reaction when the five young Navajos before him began to play a Bach lute suite—and played it well. “I was blown away,” Richter remembers. “They had taught themselves to play classical guitar by ear.”

Richter, on his own volition, returned to the high school each year to work with the students and their teacher, the school's choir instructor. He wrote two method books and took students on retreats in the red-rock beauty of the nearby Lake Powell wilderness, where they camped and played guitar under the immense desert sky.

Richter, graduate of the Royal College of Music in London, winner of the International Composers Guild Competition, and a regular guest on NPR's *Performance Today*, wasn't just showing these talented young guitarists how to play better. He taught technique and theory; he taught them how to read music and how to conduct themselves on stage as performers.

Richter treated them like what they were: serious students of classical guitar; never mind that most of them were children of poverty, prey to its damaging side effects— isolation from society and despair.

Richter's visit to Page in 1999 was just the beginning. First, he established similar programs at schools in Arizona's Bullhead City, Sedona, and Tucson, his home base. Next, he met Marc Sandroff, an entrepreneur who had moved to Tucson from Chicago. Sandroff, whose success is turning emerging businesses into winning operations, had seen a video documentary of Richter's work in Page.

Sandroff was impressed, and joined Richter in forming Lead Guitar (leadguitar.org), a 501(c)(3) not-for-profit program launched in 2006 and dedicated to providing the “highest quality music education to those who can least afford it”—at-risk students at some of our country's most impoverished schools. Located in rural and urban areas and Native sovereign nations, the schools can be rough environments where drugs and violence are endemic, and, as Richter says, where students can “feel lost in this world.”



Brad Richter with Christian Gomez (in purple) and the LG ensemble in Aspen, Colorado

“We discover kids who have no other way to be discovered,” he says.

Today, Lead Guitar is active in 64 elementary and secondary schools in five states—Arizona, California, Colorado, Illinois, and Oklahoma—and has touched the lives of more than 15,000 at-risk children.

### **‘We discover kids who have no other way to be discovered.’**

**BRAD RICHTER**

“We’re helping them believe in themselves,” says Sandroff. “We’re helping them to get in the habit of being successful.”

The Lead Guitar program is well-defined, from the academically based, classical approach and curriculum to how it identifies qualifying schools: through their eligibility for the federal Free and Reduced-Price Lunch (FRPL) program, which indicates pockets of poverty across the country.

If more than 80 percent of the students at a school are FRPL eligible, Lead Guitar foots the bill; others with lower percentage rates pay either \$1,500 or \$3,000 to help defray the approximate \$7,600 per school that it costs Lead Guitar for the program.

Funded through grants and generous corporate and private donors, Lead Guitar also helps with the cost of the instruments through partnerships with Yamaha and Instrumental Music Inc., which provide guitars at a steep discount to the schools. (Most choose the Yamaha C-40.) D’Addario provides free strings.

Participating schools are not left to interpret what the program lays out. Lead Guitar trains teachers (they can be a music teacher or a teacher with some musical experience) and augments their efforts with its own staff of instructors—most with doctorates in music, and all professional performers—who co-teach on a regular basis throughout the school year. “We want to create the complete musician,” says Richter.

### **A SAD SONG MADE BETTER**

Lead Guitar doesn't just go into schools. It takes its students to the music through affiliations with the University of Arizona, Oklahoma City University, University of Chicago, and the Aspen Music Festival and School. There, Lead Guitar students perform in world-class venues and attend performances by the stars, including Carlos Bonell, currently working with Paul McCartney on a classical composition and Richter's mentor from Royal College days. The students' families come with them to hear them play and celebrate their success.

The program at Summit View, a K–6 school south of Tucson, “first and foremost,” says principal Mary Montañó, “is increasing self-esteem and the self-confidence to perform” for the 20 third and fourth graders enrolled in the class. Located in a rural area with a mix of modest homes, mobile homes, and squatter encampments, Summit View has an FRPL of 88 percent.

“We are the hub and the heart of the community,” Montañó says of the modern, 500-student school, where colorful murals and artwork by the students, mostly of Mexican heritage, decorate the hallways. The Lead Guitar class helps with language skills, she says. “It increases oral skills, and the follow-through needed to learn a song increases muscle memory.”

The program also allows the children and their parents to do something they normally can't—go to the University of Arizona. “Families here don't have access to the city. They literally have to ask for a ride to get to Tucson,” she says.

The same is true for students at San Carlos Secondary school on the San Carlos Apache Reservation in remote east-central Arizona. “This is an isolated area,” says the Lead Guitar teacher of record and the school's English teacher, Tony Gatewood. “Students here have lived all their lives on the

reservation. They've maybe been to Phoenix for a concert, but they've never met or played with professional guitarists”—until Lead Guitar came into their lives four years ago.

Among the high points: being part of an ensemble that performed with Richter and Bonell. The music was Richter's “Once We Moved Like the Wind,” inspired by the San Carlos Apache and in homage to one of their own, Geronimo. “It was absolutely beautiful,” says Gatewood.

The youngsters at San Carlos Secondary live on one of the poorest Native reservations in the USA, with a 50-percent poverty rate. Yet Gatewood assures that he has seen positive changes in attitude about school and participation among his Lead Guitar students. “It shows them what they can achieve if they stay in the classroom,” he says.

And while these young musicians may be part of a world that seemingly lies in the shadows, Gatewood begs to differ. His students have an inside track and bring authenticity to music that speaks to life's hardships, which is expressed, he says, “naturally by these kids, and also happiness. . . . The San Carlos Apache are warriors. They're not quitters.”

### **A PLACE ON LIFE'S STAGE**

For Sandroff, Lead Guitar is “dear to my

heart.” For Richter, it is “the most meaningful part” of an accomplished life. Both relish the anecdotes and success stories, particularly one from the earliest days of the organization, and another from last year. Both underscore what else the exposure to music has given these youngsters: validation.

Christian Gomez, now 18, was in the seventh grade at Basalt Middle School near Aspen, Colorado, and had just joined the newly established Lead Guitar program when his erratic behavior gave his music teacher pause. Could he be hearing impaired? He was, and the discovery changed his life—almost as much as the guitar itself. Being deaf had not stopped Gomez from playing. “I learned to play by ear,” he says from Colorado, where he is enrolled at Colorado Mountain College. “When I'd tune the guitar, I could ‘hear’ if it wasn't tuned right. I could feel the music. It was like a slow wave. I could feel the waves. It was a wonderful feeling.”

What caused him angst was the fear of failure. “I started to get pretty scared. What if all the practice wasn't enough,” he says, adding that he almost gave up. He didn't. He kept practicing, and through Lead Guitar events, continued to perform. The audience, he says, “would stand up and applaud. My mother was so proud of me. After a concert, she'd start crying.”

“I'm very glad I joined Lead Guitar,” Gomez says. “If I hadn't, I wouldn't have known I was meant for music.”

A year ago, Ismael Mercado, now 12, was beside himself. He had forgotten the assignment for his Lead Guitar class—to write a song. But he did have a song, one he'd already written, called “Ishmael's Song.” Could he play it, instead?

“Everyone was crying when I stopped,” he reports from his home in Las Vegas. The song is about his father, Augustin, who has been detained in Mexico for nearly three years. “My dad taught me to play the guitar,” he says. “We played music together, we walked together. We would play the guitar and sing together. I miss him,” he says, memories echoed in lyrics like, “I remember you dad, how hard you worked to provide for me.”

In April 2017, Mercado performed his song at the University of Arizona as part of a Wellness Through the Arts concert featuring the program's founder, actor and Broadway star Ben Vereen. Once again, Mercado touched an audience with his heartfelt story of a boy's love for his father.

“My dad is proud of me. He learned the song right away, and he plays it to friends,” says Mercado. “I'm very grateful to Mr. Richter.” **AC**



Andrew Smith with students at Edison Elementary in Phoenix, Arizona