



Beyond the Notes

Piano teacher Marcia Vahl makes sweet music out of life skills.

IT'S NOT JUST MUSIC MARCIA VAHL'S STUDENTS ARE LEARNING ON THE IVORY KEYS. A veteran piano teacher with more than 30 years of experience under her belt, Vahl says she loves the creative outlet that piano allows, but she also emphasizes the important life skills that lessons can teach. Discipline, determination, focus and positive thinking—all of these are as important as the notes on Vahl's sheet music.

"It takes a lot of discipline to be a musician," says Vahl, who teaches lessons out of her Maple Grove home.

Vahl teaches all ages, from 4-year-olds to adults. She loves teaching at all levels, but says beginners are the hardest. Many people think anyone who knows how to play piano can teach a beginner, Vahl says.

But she thinks the opposite is true: It takes a strong teacher to teach good habits early on, otherwise they'll have to be untaught later. "One of the biggest mistakes is playing on the edge of the keys," she says.

She's also big on teaching students to read—not just memorize—music. Her students learn to read and interpret music so they'll be able to read and play any piece of music they come across.

"Many teachers give up on teaching how to sight read and teach to play by rote," she says. "But then the student will never be able to play independently. That's really my goal: to educate my students so they are independent music learners."

Vahl's insistence on going deeper into the music has benefited high school senior Alyssa Lund, who



To read more about Marcia Vahl's piano passion, including an exclusive Q&A, visit maplegrovemag.com.

has taken lessons from Vahl since eighth grade. "She's really good at helping me have a lot of expression in my playing," Alyssa says. "She encourages me to personalize my pieces and become a more developed player."

Alyssa and her sister, freshman Kaelie Lund, both say they hated piano lessons when they were younger and took them only at their parents' insistence. But lessons with Vahl have taught them to love the instrument and appreciate how it's changed their lives.

"You have to be diligent, and you have to want it," Kaelie says. "You have to set goals, and I think that's also helped in other areas of my life." After all, piano playing should be enjoyable.

"I encourage students to think of every step as a victory," she says. "And I try to have the attitude in my studio—isn't this fun?"

Because it's fun for her, Vahl still takes lessons and performs often at her congregation, Northwest Bible Church. She has a gift for music in ministry, she says, and for playing by ear. In fact, it was her youth pastor who taught her to play chords, which led to her being able to play any hymn out there. She majored in piano and music education at Pillsbury Baptist College in Owatonna, and later taught "the gamut of music education" in Florida and Minnesota.

"She's really dedicated with her students," says high school senior Mary Onyshuk, who's taken lessons from Vahl for more than a decade. "She's willing to take you as far as you want to go. When I was younger, I didn't enjoy contests, and she never pressured me. She helped me conquer my fear of playing in front of people."

Alyssa agrees, saying Vahl is a very supportive teacher, one who helps her focus and guides her through different styles of music. Thanks to Vahl, Alyssa says she has found a way to put a piece of herself into the music selections she plays.

"It sounds really cheesy, but I'd highly recommend her," Kaelie says. "She is super patient. I hated learning piano from workbooks, so she gave me flashcards and little puzzles. Even if you think you can't learn the textbook way, she can help you find a way to learn." //