

# Arts In Wellesley

## Plugged IN-to Teen Rockers Local Non-Profit Teaches and Supports Youth Rock Bands

By DAVE HALPERIN

When 17-year-old Wellesley musician Charles Coleman took the stage at the Middle East in Cambridge recently, and then at Village Club in Needham with his band, Awesome Express, or if he happens to be reflecting on Awesome Express' myriad battle of the bands' victories, in many ways he has the non-profit organization Plugged In to thank.

"I cannot speak highly enough of Plugged In. It is such an amazing program," Coleman says of the organization that helped form Awesome Express and has supported, assisted, and instructed them musically and personally since the group's formation.

"Anyone who loves music would appreciate what it teaches," Coleman said. "It teaches unity, to work together towards a greater cause through music. It's one of the greatest lessons you can have for anyone who's learning about music."

Coleman is one of many area students of the Needham-based rock band program - including six from Wellesley - which functions as part

music and band teaching program, part charitable organization, and part-time family and peer group for many teens who may not have a natural clique within their respective schools.

"I can't even tell you," Coleman adds. "It's been the biggest change in my whole entire life. I learned more about myself than I could ever imagine... Most kids come in as shy younger kids, kids just going into junior high who don't know what they really want. It just shaped me more as a person... I feel like I came to grasp who I am through just what they were kind of teaching us... the lessons they were teaching."

Plugged In was started by husband and wife team Tom Pugh and Sandra Rizkallah following Rizkallah's epiphany: there should be a way to hone the interest that so many teenagers - her own included - seemed to have in starting bands. Placing flyers at a nearby cafe, they soon had five kids and, yes, one band. Today the organization supports the guitar licks, bass lines, vocal contortions, and drum beats of more than 110 students and 33 bands that practice once a

week in preparation for twice yearly concerts.

"The emphasis is on compassion and that shifts the focus off of ego to compassion and caring, and it totally changes the atmosphere," Rizkallah said. "They're thinking about music and not thinking about ego. The difference is that there's no competitions, there's not a battle of the bands. (Plugged In does provide information to bands about competitions if the desire is there.) We don't place them and talk about who's the better band and the worse band."

Leading up to Plugged In performances, all its members are invited to a "community engagement" night, where anyone can propose a non-profit group to be the beneficiary of any proceeds from the next concert. And after a presentation by Nelson Barnett of the Plugged In band Meg 'n Da



Awesome Express, including Charles Coleman of Wellesley, second from left,

Know Skoolers, it was decided that the January 13 and 15 performances of 33 bands at Village Club would benefit the Dup15Q Alliance, which provides family support and promotes awareness, research and targeted treatments for Chromosome 15q Duplication Syndrome.

Wellesley's Michael Gee of the heavy metal, Metallica- and System of a Down-influenced Insanity Plague said he sometimes attends the community engagement nights, but that he's focused on the music.

"It's been awesome," he said of Plugged In, which brought together himself and a drummer with whom he was already collaborating with, with three of Plugged In's young musicians. "There's a reason that I'm in the band I'm in right now, and overall we work well together."

Other Wellesley youth involved in Plugged In include Michael Langston of the band Stop, Drop and Rock and Andrew Zannetos of The Palindromes.

According to Rizkallah, part of

what attracts and keeps teens involved is what she calls the "perfectly imperfect" nature of the business, a definition that's exemplified by one of their two on-site rehearsal spaces, a small garage squeezed into a driveway next to a local landscaping company's trucks and equipment. Adorned with rock posters, crammed with instruments, equipment, and electrical cords, and the floor covered with a faded and curled-at-the-edges rug, the interior of the garage looks like the space that any self-respecting garage band would call home.

When talk from Rizkallah and Pugh of renovating the space reached their students, the students, she said, cried foul. "No!" they said, "you can't change this!" she remembered.

"One thing is that we're sort of perfectly imperfect," she explained. "We don't always know exactly what we're doing, but it works out. Because we're not a glossy, perfect machine, it gives the kids an opening to be themselves. It gives them room to grow as we move onto our next steps."



Insanity Plague, including Michael Wong, far right, recently performed at a Plugged In show in Needham.

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