

Nick Rail: Turning STEM to STEAM

By Jack Smith, Santa Barbara Education Foundation

When Nick Rail was in the fourth grade, his elementary school decided to offer a band program for the first time. His parents saved up enough money to buy him a clarinet and Nick was able to play in the band.

Nick was unsure how his parents were able to afford the instrument since they came from a low income household. Nonetheless, this opportunity gave him a newfound passion and direction in life.

“Once I joined the band, I suddenly had a new group of friends, a common purpose, all those good things that go along with learning how to play an instrument and being creative.”

But what if Nick was never given the opportunity to practice music at an early age? Would he have found that group of friends or common purpose?

Unfortunately, the reality is that many students are not given this opportunity and miss out on important creative expression in childhood. Nick’s awareness of this reality is what drove him to provide support for music education through his business, Nick Rail Music.

This support began in 1989 when he partnered with the Santa Barbara Education Foundation. At that time, many of the instruments being used in the schools were old, rundown, and should not have been in service. Because of this, Nick came into contact with the Foundation and began the Nick Rail Music Trust which raised money to exchange those instruments for better ones. Since its creation, the trust has provided schools with over \$100,000 worth of high-quality instruments which would have otherwise been unaffordable.

But Nick Rail’s impact does not stop there. That same year, Nick found out that the school district was canceling the only band course offered to students and he immediately took action.

“I didn't want to see the kids lose that art, that opportunity to play. So I went to the District and got permission to rent the band room at La Colina, the junior high.”

He then went on to find various music instructors and a director for the camp. That summer, the Foundation was able to hold the first Nick Rail Band Camp with subsidization from Nick’s store. Today, the band camp is kept at a low cost per student and offers additional scholarships for students with limited funds in order to provide an affordable music education experience for all.

Because of Nick Rail, thousands of students are provided with instruments and music education like he had been when he was young. At the 2020 HOPE Awards, the Santa Barbara Education Foundation will honor Nick Rail for changing the reality of educational opportunity in the Santa Barbara Unified School District.

“I'm just one person of many that believes in the importance of education and music education in particular. And it takes more than one person to move the needle here, so it's an honor, a privilege and I'm humbled.”

In Nick's eyes, music education creates an important balance between creative expression and traditional academics, making every student deserving of these opportunities. Nick's efforts have helped establish this balance, adding an A to STEM.

The HOPE Awards will take place at the Santa Barbara Historical Museum. For more information and tickets, please visit sbefoundation.org/hope-awards.