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# Finding the song that's in everyone

## Apple Tree Arts celebrates

By Donna Boynton TELEGRAM & GAZETTE STAFF

**GRAFTON**— When Lauren Almy was in the second grade, her class was assigned a project: Each student was to tell a fairy tale creatively. Some were told through poems; others, dioramas. Lauren, however, chose to write a song and play the piano.

To do so, Lauren tapped into music lessons she has been taking since she was a toddler with Apple Tree Arts, a nonprofit arts organization headquartered in Grafton.

Lauren, now in fourth grade, is just one of the students who has benefited from the organization since it began 20 years ago in the basement of the Evangelical Congregational Church on the Grafton Common.

The founders of Apple Tree Arts believe everyone has a song in them — whether it is a classical composition or a vocal performance. It is a gift everyone is born with, and the earlier it is nurtured, the sooner the talent will blossom.

Apple Tree Arts itself has blossomed in the last 20 years, moving from its headquarters in the church to a satellite location in Westboro, to rental space in the Grafton Municipal Center, and, if all goes smoothly, to a performance space at One Grafton Common.

The arts group has grown in its offerings as well, branching out from focusing on young children to educating all ages — not just in music, but in the performing arts.

Abigail Braunn, 10, of Shrewsbury, has been attending Apple Tree Arts since she



Emily Mossey, 6, of Grafton holds a whale aloft during a rehearsal at St. Philip's Church in Grafton. (T&G Staff / TOM RETTIG)

was an infant. At the time, Lisa A. Scarlett, a former teacher of the early childhood classes and now the group's performing arts director, would care for Abigail during the day and Abigail would accompany Mrs. Scarlett and her children to the "Tots and Tunes" classes. Abigail quickly grew to love music, always singing along to cassettes in her family car.

This year, Abigail was part of the summer musical theater, showcasing her vocal talents.

"Apple Tree Arts probably tapped into a talent she never thought she had," said Christine Braunn, Abigail's mother. "She studied in a comfortable environment and that probably has helped her to be comfortable in front of people."

Apple Tree Arts started in 1989 as a collaboration between the Rev. Timothy Hanley of the Evangelical Congregational Church, Donna Blanchard, and several other people, including Martha Hanley, Patti Sims, Elizabeth Mack, Kelly Clark, the Rev. Timothy Hanley, Liz Humphreys, Gail Elmore, Kathy Vandenengel, Rachel Murray, Jan Barlow, Kathy Cederberg and Missy Nicholson.

"I feel music is very closely aligned with spirituality and religion," Ms. Blanchard said. "With music being a discipline and an emotion, I felt it was aligned with the human beings' inner spirit."

The name — Apple Tree Arts — is meant to represent an umbrella, much like an apple tree full of fruit, for many artistic experiences.

The arts group began with two early childhood classes of 10 students at the church, and two outreach programs in Westboro for preschool students. The program grew under the direction of Ms. Barlow, the education director, and became a nonprofit in 1997.

"It just grew like an amoeba — it just split, split and split," said Ms. Blanchard, noting that as more students were added, more faculty was added. "The point has always been to be a nonprofit organization that can sustain itself, and to keep the cost down."

Apple Tree Arts now serves students in Millbury, Sutton, Upton, Douglas, Oxford, Westboro, Shrewsbury, Webster, Northboro and Marlboro, and is teaching in space at the Evangelical Church, the Grafton Municipal Center and, as soon as a lease agreement is worked out, One Grafton Common. Today, Apple Tree Arts offers 26 classes taught by 25 faculty members, five staff members and a 10-member board of directors. Apple Tree Arts serves 200 families in the region and 160 private study students.

"Children need lifelong learning and influences," said Ms. Blanchard, noting that the programs are structured on basics for the early childhood level and build

upon that as children age and advance musically. In the beginning, instructors focus on how music can be fun and playful.

“A lot of current music education research proves that active participation in a musical experience is the only way to live up to your innate potential to be musical,” said Ms. Blanchard, adding that music is not just about learning songs and melodies; it incorporates math, language and spatial skills.