

Publication: The Miami Herald; Date: Jan 22, 2015; Section: Nbrs – North East (Aventura, North Miami, Miami Beach); Page: 4NE

MIAMI LIGHTHOUSE FOR THE BLIND

Young musicians visit Jungle Island

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On Saturday mornings, while many teenagers are sleeping in, the 25 students from the music program at Miami Lighthouse for the Blind are learning sound production from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m.

During the summer, the music production program meets Monday through Friday for two months.

Last Saturday, the teens put down their instruments and had a chance to visit Jungle Island for a Touch Tour to visit animals for a multi-sensory field trip.

“It’s just a fun day, a break away from music because they spend four hours on Saturday on just pure music,” said Nick Mastrovito, the music coordinator and instructor. “Sometimes its good to have a break.”

The tour began with the group entering the “Kangaroo Konnection,” where the teens got up close to the hopping marsupials.

“Students are actually able to go right up to them, help feed them, touch them,” said Rachel Pinzur, Jungle Island spokesperson. “And that’s an experience that you wouldn’t necessarily get anywhere else.”

The group then proceeded to the petting area, toured the facility and were treated to their own personal live animal show.

During the show, a bearded dragon, a blue tongue skink, cockatoo birds, a porcupine and a large python were brought out for the young musicians to hold.

For Shawn Roller, an education specialist who has worked at Jungle Island for 10 years, the main goal on Saturday was to teach the young adults to have a love for animals.

“Hopefully they’ll have a greater appreciation for all the animals in the world and they’ll want to preserve and protect these beautiful animals and habits that they live in.”

The experience was exciting for Romelus Jeune, 16, a student at Hialeah-Miami Lakes Senior High School who had visited Jungle Island before, but had never had the opportunity to get up close to the animals. His favorite part was seeing Jay Jay, the cockatoo, who spoke Spanish.

“My dad speaks Spanish and I’m dying to learn,” said Jeune, who is originally from Haiti. “I was like, ‘You see that bird can speak Spanish, well I can do that too.’ ”

For Jeune, who had brain cancer and became visually impaired after surgery, these experiences and living his dream of learning to play the drums is why he attends the music program.

The Miami Lighthouse for the Blind Better Chance Music Production Program provides music education year

round and is open to all Miami-Dade students. About 15 to 20 percent of the children are visually impaired. Many of them are from under-served communities.

“We teach them how to play instruments. We teach them how to produce music. We teach them how to perform. And once we get all our work performable, we take it to the greater Miami area,” said Mastrovito. “What we do is we prepare them to be as complete musician as they can be.”

The students have played at venues such as the Bayside Marina Stage, the naturalization ceremony and for Jackson Hospital.

On top of teaching music appreciation, instruction and exploration, the program aims to enhance self-efficacy and positive peer relations.

Leon Stewart, 21, who is completely blind and is the only accordion player in the program, is thankful for the support and friends he has made.

“I got to meet cool people,” said Stewart, whose mom and sister live in Tallahassee. “For the most part I’m alone, so that’s great.”

For more information, visit www.miamilighthouse.org/Music_Program.asp.



PHOTOS BY MATIAS J. OCNER/MIAMI HERALD STAFF

UP CLOSE: Musician Leon Stewart, 21, carefully pets a porcupine next to animal keeper Marisela Gutierrez at Jungle Island Jan. 17



SNAKES ALIVE! Ramon Almonte, 14, above, pets a reptile.



Below, from left, Angelo D' Ercole, 17, Leon Stewart, 21, and Jimena Peralta, 18, pet a python.



Below, Chris Colado, 14,
feeds an animal during the Miami Lighthouse for the Blind field trip.