

# UMFCNAfME

## Spring 2021 Newsletter



17 April | 2021

Edited by:  
Kara Iwanowski



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## A Message from our President, Mia Laping

Greetings NAFME family!

I hope that your semesters are wrapping up successfully and that you can take time in the coming weeks to get some well-earned rest! As I look back on all that we did this semester, I can't help but feel incredibly grateful to be part of such a hard-working and vibrant organization. Despite the continued challenges from the pandemic, we managed to find moments of productivity, passion, and camaraderie with each other. Your focus and drive to make the chapter and its members better is inspiring to watch and I look forward to seeing it continue next semester and beyond.

I wanted to give a special thanks in particular to those who were part of a committee this semester! Our multitude of events, fundraisers, professional development, and social media efforts would not have been possible without your contributions and creativity. I cannot wait to see it continue next semester as you all continue to take an active role in our chapter.

Continue to find time to connect with one another and build those meaningful connections that will last beyond our years here at UM! Treasure the moments you have with one another and know that I'm always here if you need anything. Seniors, from myself and the E-Board, we wish you the best of luck with the rest of student teaching and beyond, and you'll always have a home here at UMFC NAFME :)

Have a great rest of the semester and summer and I'll see you all in the fall!

Sincerely,  
Mia Laping

## Our current Eboard:

- Jose Prieto, President-Elect
- Benjamin Gonzci, Treasurer
- Emma Gladden, Historian
- Kara Iwanowski, Secretary

# Elizabeth Borowsky

Teacher, Composer, Musician

Elizabeth Borowsky, piano, enjoys a vibrant musical career as soloist and collaborative pianist, composer, educator, speaker, and recording artist. She has been a featured performer at distinguished venues including Carnegie Hall and The Kennedy Center, and has performed in over thirty countries. Borowsky has also earned a reputation as a dedicated instructor, presenting masterclasses in the USA, Lithuania, Germany, Cuba, Japan, Poland, and Germany. She has been a member of the piano faculty of the International Music Institute and Festival USA since 2003 and was appointed Executive Director in 2010. She is founder and director of Piano Prodigies LLC, a holistic approach to private piano instruction that uniquely balances the technical, artistic, and personal development of each student.



## The Art of Encouragement

By Elizabeth Borowsky

Twelve years ago, I went on a date that changed my life—and my perspective on teaching—forever. Frank and I met at a restaurant in a stripmall near my home in Maryland. I had been to the shopping plaza countless times before, but had never noticed the little tavern between Starbucks and the grocery store. We were seated in the back room, and I could tell Frank was quite nervous: he was chewing gum at a rapid pace (note: it was a nice enough place that it had cloth table coverings) and ordered a burger with *nothing* on it. This was our first date (we had met online) and we made small talk: I asked him about his work and he asked me about mine. After sharing a bit about my performing and teaching careers, I noticed his eyes were glazing over and I inquired if he had any experience in music. He answered that he had initially signed up for chorus in high school but hadn't had a good experience and stopped after a short time. I cautiously pried a bit more: what about it wasn't a good experience? He proceeded to share a painful recollection of a teacher that had made it abundantly clear to Frank on multiple occasions that Frank “doesn't have musical talent” and lacks a sense of pitch or rhythm. He deemed Frank “hopeless” and suggested (in front of his peers) that Frank lip-sync for the rehearsals and concerts. Frank, now in his 30s, was still haunted by this experience. When I suggested that we go to the local American Legion to take a beginner swing dance class, he was flustered. I offered a compromise: we'd go just to listen to the music. And we did. Finding a couple chairs on the side of the ballroom, I spent an hour helping him learn how to listen and find

the pulse (a concept that would have been essential had we been dancing). Once he got over telling himself that he can't... he did.

I don't know what happened to Frank (that was our first and last date) but I do know what happened to me. I continued on as a teacher, and my instincts that there is tremendous power in how students perceive themselves, and that teachers can influence the entire process of learning based on the way they communicate with students, were confirmed over and over again. And talent, whatever mysterious force that actually is, comprises but a small part of the equation.

Self-filling prophecies are not a new concept in psychology. Research over the past half century has shown that positive expectations will influence performance positively, and the inverse is equally true. Many leadership, business, and sports programs utilize the concepts of expectancy theory to their advantage. And there are plenty of anecdotes that seem to support the effectiveness of this practice. Most recently, after the 2021 Super Bowl, Tampa Bay Buccaneers wide receiver Chris Godwin, Jr. spoke of the energy and mindset that quarterback Tom Brady brought to the team when he joined last year. "I think the biggest thing that he brought was just the mentality of *expecting* to win over *hoping* to win," Godwin said on The Pat McAfee Show. "We've had a bunch of talented guys for years but could never really put it together." Given that Tampa Bay had not made it past the wildcard playoff since their 2002 Superbowl win, this was a significant success—granting them victory and Brady his seventh Super Bowl championship.

The concept of fostering positive expectations is in fact one of the reasons I named my studio *Piano Prodigies*. It may initially sound excessive—as if I only take "talented students" who are intent on pursuing the competition circuits and a musical career. The truth is that I am willing to work with anyone who is interested in learning, and I take pride in turning the casual student into someone who is passionate about piano... and learning.

There's a bit of a backstory to my studio's name. Growing up, my non-musician father was adamant that all children have tremendous potential, and the ability to learn a skill—music included— is innately human. This led to a good number of debates between him and my college-professor-cello Mom, who tried to explain (in vain!) that there are varying levels of talent and potential among students, at least as far as the trajectory of growth and technique are concerned (though she will always emphasize that hard work supersedes talent!).

Over the years, my witnessing this chronic debate developed a sincere curiosity in nature versus nurture as applied to music. What would be the impact of cultivating a sense of pride in enrollment in the program amongst students and parents alike? If I used every skill that I had accumulated as a pianist and teacher and customized my approach to each student's learning style, what could they achieve if they believed? And if I believed in their potential?

Now, having worked with hundreds of students through my studio as well as summer programs and masterclasses, I will admit that there *are* variables in students' learning abilities and styles.

Particular and often indescribable talents seem to make it easier for some to pick up musical skills than others. There are a variety of "talents" ranging from grasping the concept of reading notes to the ability to hear a piece and pick it out by ear, extemporization, rhythmic reading acuity, the ability to memorize quickly, or simply having the sensitivity to create an expressive and nuanced interpretation. Sometimes, students seem to be endowed with multiple gifts, and

other times, students seem to struggle all around, regardless of parental musical training or involvement. But, under most circumstances, the more time and effort I take to really invest in a student and show interest in their progress, the more they respond and grow.

It's a simple concept, but sometimes hard to put into practice. After years of training hard within our field, we seek the respect of our students, and don't want to have to hold their hand through every step of the learning process. The "halfway" point where we want to meet for effort, respect, and persistence often seems very much closer to them than to us. But I am a true believer in not trying to predict a student's destiny and in believing that my role is to contribute to their education. Like physicians, our mantra must be "do no harm." I never assume I know what a student will (or won't) do with music in the future, or what effect one lesson may have on the rest of their life.

Real life examples abound. Here are two that have truly shaped my perspective:

- I must have cringed when 10-year-old Alice told me, "I love piano... it's the only thing I am really good at." Her progress over the past three years had been minimal, if that, and she admitted that she didn't practice much. I had been planning to suggest a hiatus from piano at the end of the year, as nothing I did seemed to make a difference and moreover, she was easily frustrated when we worked on technical challenges together in lessons. I had noticed, however, that she visibly gave more effort the last few minutes of each lesson: when the next student walked in the door. I racked my brain for solutions: perhaps being in a group atmosphere where practices take place together more than independently is what she would benefit from? One day, she sang along with one of her pieces and I noticed that she had a good voice. I gently suggested to her mom that she join the local youth choir. Alice auditioned, was accepted and transitioned from piano to the chorus over the summer. Six years later, she is thriving and plans to attend college for vocal music education.
- Claire is a competitive multi-sport athlete and an active member of her school's student government. Because of the growing time commitments of her other extra-curricular activities, practicing became increasingly scarce. I had been as understanding as I could but finally reached the end of my rope. Why should we struggle to gain momentum while I have a waitlist of eager students ready to take her place? I reached out to her parents, and her Dad asked for a meeting. We talked for ninety minutes. "Perhaps she'll get a college sports scholarship (that would be great!), but when she's 60, 70, or 80, she likely won't be playing that sport. We want her to be able to play piano for life, and hope someday she will realize what a gift this is. If you can hang on and be patient with her, we will be so grateful!" I adjusted Claire's repertoire to shorter pieces in styles she likes to play, but with a fair amount of incremental challenge from one to the next. And more importantly, I switched my mindset: accepting that her progress may come in spurts and that our lessons are practice sessions. Three years later, Claire is a high school junior and continues to take lessons, and was recently chosen as the pianist for the school's jazz band.

I have often said that as a music teacher you have to love music and you have to love people...  
*but you have to love people a bit more than you love music.*

Being patient doesn't mean that I'm easy. I give students respect, but ask for it in return. I give them patience, but I ask them to give me their focus and be willing to work tirelessly on details. I aspire for each student to develop a keen ear and know what is possible with technique and artistry. Being an astute listener is possible at every age and level.

I have enjoyed working with some tremendously talented young musicians, and it has been exciting (and challenging) to mentor them in their progress. Guiding them and finding the right balance between critique, sternness, and motivation/encouragement has been a responsibility that I have taken seriously.



However, it's the students who have struggled, who have challenged (and taught) me the most.

Regardless of what professional path they follow, I am convinced listening, feeling, and communicating with nuance and expression will serve them well in every domain of life. The cornerstones to our successful work together are building trust, cultivating curiosity, and nurturing a passion for process, consistently expressed through both words and actions. As Theodore Roosevelt said, "People don't care how much you know until they know how much you care."

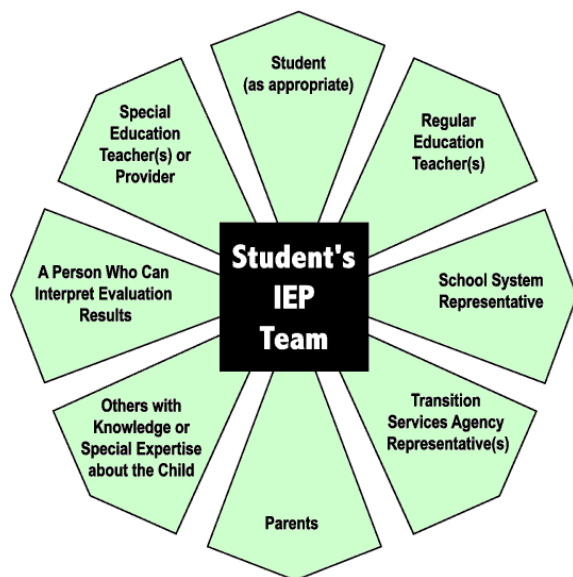
\*All names changed to protect identities.

# Supporting Students with Disabilities During Virtual Learning

By Izzi Guzman



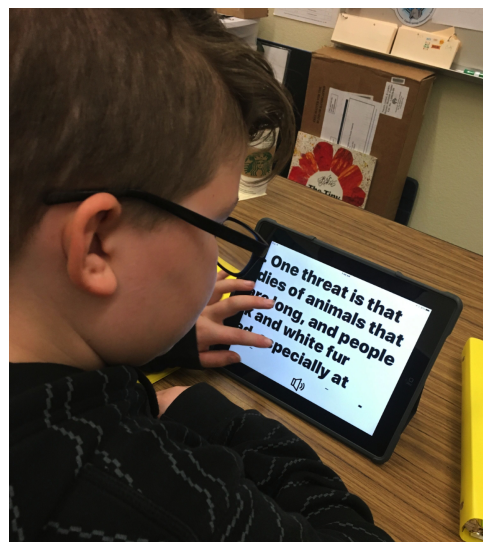
As a student and musician with a disability, I've encountered some of the non-forgiving aspects of virtual learning first-hand. The shift to Zoom was certainly not easy for anyone at first with the necessary adjustments needed to instruct and learn through computer screens. For students with disabilities, however, learning remotely can be especially challenging because of the lack of in-person accommodations and the general environment of learning online that is not always accessible. In a musical environment where interaction and creation are key, it is even more crucial for us to be aware and cooperate with students with disabilities to make them comfortable through this process for however long virtual learning remains. As with and even more so than in-person learning, understanding and taking action upon a student's Individualized Education Plan, or IEP, is the first step to understand where they need support and what gaps there are in in-person and virtual instruction. For those unaware of what an IEP is, it is essentially an outline of a student's educational needs, goals, and services that they need to receive. There is also documentation similar to an IEP called a 504 Plan



that lists accommodations for a student based on their needs. These plans are developed by the student, their parents/guardians, teachers, and extra support faculty who work with the student or have expertise in the field. It is imperative when reviewing an IEP to take into account all of the accommodations they will need, and actively implement them in the classroom. In addition, asking the student individually if they need any extra support will make them more comfortable in the classroom environment and asking for what they need to be successful. Not everything might be written in the IEP!

Of course, the accommodations that students receive during in-person instruction will likely not be possible during remote learning. With that, we must consider alternatives and workarounds, and depending on the student's ability to use technology based on their disability, they will likely need their accommodations heightened. For example, I had to ask for more accommodations when my high school switched to remote learning because staring at a computer screen for hours is not feasible for me due to my visual impairment. This also ties into advocacy, which is more important for older students but is a skill that can only be fostered through a safe, welcoming classroom environment where having students with disabilities does not make the class any less great.

There have been numerous articles and reports that students with disabilities are unfortunately more than likely than their non-disabled peers to fall behind on instruction. While the reasons behind this vary by the disability, one aspect of teaching that should never be left out, even in in-person instruction, is giving individual students who need that support because of their ability differences. Students should not necessarily be singled out from the rest of their peers in activities unless a different learning mode is necessary, but checking in with students is key. Students with learning differences might have trouble understanding what a quarter note is without the capability to do live, call-and-response clapping exercises. Students with hearing differences might not understand what we mean when we compare straight eighth notes to swing eighth notes. Students with vision loss, myself included, will need to have enlarged materials on the Zoom interface even more so than in-person instruction because of how computer screens do not suit those who are visually impaired. Too often I have seen Zoom PowerPoints show the smallest text, which not only hurts visually impaired individuals but also those who are visual learners. These concepts can reach far beyond disabled students and neurodivergent students and should be considered for all students who will inevitably have different strengths and weaknesses in learning.



That being said, just because students will need additional support online does not mean they should be separated from their non-disabled peers. One of the determinants of remote learning is the lack of social interaction, which we can all relate to. For students with disabilities who more likely than not are excluded from their peers' friend groups to begin with, this is piling on top of them even more. As we learn from voices of minority groups such as people who are BIPOC, AAPI, and LGBTQ+, disabled and neurodivergent students must also be included in the mix. Even for those who are not able to express themselves through verbal communication, their voices are just as valid. Especially through Zoom where every student can be seen at once, it can be easy for non-disabled and neurotypical students to pick on odd movements or behaviors they see. While some of these visuals may be obvious, it hurts both parties if this is allowed in the classroom. The social life of students with disabilities falls flat while their non-disabled peers stay in a bubble of only accepting those who are "normal", which raises the question - what is normal, anyway?

During remote instruction, one role that we will inevitably have to fill is support that students would normally get on the school campus. It's common for students with learning disabilities and mobility differences to have a certified aid by them during the school day to help with the learning process, getting them around the school day, and getting them the accommodations they needed. Even myself such a minor disability had an aid during my early elementary years, so keep in mind that what I mentioned as examples is just the norm and is not always the only situation. In addition, students who would get pulled out of class to meet with additional support staff rather than them being in the classroom likely do not happen during remote learning for many different reasons. Not having these guides throughout the school day can leave students confused and dependent on others such as their own family members who might not be able to be there with them throughout the school day because of work and other obligations. While virtual learning will fortunately and hopefully not be around much longer, the topics I have discussed here can and should be applied to in-person instruction and any instance where we are mentoring or teaching students with disabilities in an individual and group setting. Whether we have experience with this or not, we will encounter these students during our teaching careers at some point. We must understand, connect, and collaborate with our disabled and neurodivergent students, now more than ever.



#### Extra Resources:

<https://www.verywellfamily.com/essential-parts-of-an-individual-education-program-2162702#:~:text=Every%20IEP%20must%20include%20a,and%20social%20and%20behavioral%20skills.>

<https://www.insidehighered.com/quicktakes/2020/10/28/report-students-disabilities-face-more-pandemic-hardships#:~:text=Students%20who%20self%20identified%20as,report%2C%20which%20is%20the%20latest>

<https://hechingerreport.org/is-the-pandemic-our-chance-to-reimagine-education-for-students-with-disabilities/>



# Advocacy Week 2021 Recap



Thank you everyone for a wonderful and COVID-safe Advocacy Week 2021! We had an amazing week of scrunchie-selling, volunteering, and conducting.



<https://linktr.ee/umfcnafme>