



It's never too late

Learn to play an instrument as an adult

Barbara Evans recently learned to play piano and enjoys the sense of accomplishment it gives her.

By Charity Wanta

Barbara Evans, a nurse at the Wisconsin Department of Health and Family Services, always wanted to learn to play the piano. This past summer she saw an advertisement for a group piano class for beginning adults at **Farley's House of Pianos** and decided to give it a try. Now she is enjoying group camaraderie and a sense of accomplishment and hopes to be able to play some Christmas carols for her parents this season. "The more I learn to play, the more I want to learn to play," says Evans.

If you've ever regretted not learning to play an instrument, be assured that it's not too late. The Madison area offers a number of opportunities tailored for adults.

The class at Farley's is an off-shoot of a national movement that targets adult beginners. Three instructors from Farley's attended "Recreational Music-Making for Adults," a workshop offered last summer in four locations across the country, including Madison. The workshop presented CDs and books intended for beginning adults. Workshop attendees learned that 10,000 baby boomers turn 50 every day, indicating the large potential for these adult-focused materials.

Renee Farley, co-owner of Farley's and the coordinator for the

adult lessons, says they include "lots of people close to retirement age." Years ago Farley's father indicated, upon retirement, that he was interested in using his time to learn to play an instrument but said that no one his age starts. Today that's not the case.

Jen Roth, executive director of **The Monroe Street Fine Arts Center**, agrees that it's never too late to learn to play an instrument. She says, "Late bloomers blossom. You might not make a lifetime habit out of it, but you may find just the thing." The Monroe Street Fine Arts Center offers four private music rooms where students attend piano, violin, cello, guitar, harmonica and voice lessons.

The **University of Wisconsin-Madison Continuing Studies** offers noncredit music classes that teach strings, winds, voice, piano, guitar and folk instruments. Most classes are intended for beginners, and the education experience is structured for adults. The greatest population in these classes is in the 40- to 60-year-old range. **Chelcy Bowles**, director of continuing education and music, says, "We want people to have a chance to get back to it or get into it for the first time."

Bowles admits that some physical skills diminish with age but says teachers ensure that students know how to overcome obstacles. In fact, she claims that adults have some advantages over younger students because adults tend to know their learning styles and how to apply themselves. She encourages adults to enter in and not be daunted: "Anyone can learn. It's about finding the right instrument and the right learning situation and then applying yourself."

The instructors at UW Continuing Studies try to discover the students' goals and give suggestions for accomplishing them. Some students are parents who want to learn an instrument so that they can play it along with their children. Some students attend simply because they own an instrument and want to learn to play it. After their lessons, students sometimes put together their own ensemble or join a community one.



“When you learn a piece, you can do something you couldn’t do a week ago. It’s a pleasing accomplishment.”

– Renee Farley

With all these options — and there are probably even more — some may wonder where to begin. Farley, Roth and Bowles all agree that piano is one of the best instruments for beginners. According to Farley, “No matter the direction you take later, piano is a great starter; it gives you a broad base of information musically.”

As for the advantages of learning to play an instrument, Bowles lists friendship, enjoyment and accomplishment.

Farley says, “When you learn a piece, you can do something you couldn’t do a week ago. It’s a pleasing accomplishment.”

Roth adds, “It’s about developing and expressing yourself. Learning an instrument can keep your brain sharp. You’ll get a kick out of getting better.”



Madison-based freelance writer Charity Wanta had only a few months of piano lessons as a child but remembers how to play “Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star,” her two-year-old daughter’s favorite.

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