

Young musicians rock out in Needham to support Dup15q

Young rock musicians' concerts to benefit research into rare genetic disorder

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Nelson Barnett of Belmont played the guitar while his younger brother, Roland, looked at a book.

It's probably safe to say that some rock stars are known for having big egos. But if Sandra Rizkallah and Tom Pugh have anything to do with it, the next generation of American idols will be different.

Ten years ago, Rizkallah and Pugh founded Plugged In, a nonprofit music center in Needham for those 8 to 18 who love to play rock music. The organization emphasizes an ensemble approach in which the youths are organized into groups based on skill level, personality, instrument of choice, and musical interests. The after-school program divides the year into three terms, each ending with a concert.

And that's where the second part of its mission - to teach young people about the importance of giving back to the community - comes in.

"Our goal with Plugged In is to have the charitable aspect of the program be so meaningful for our students that they will continue using their music to help others throughout their lives," said Rizkallah. To that end, each concert not only showcases the young performers, but also serves as a fund-raiser for a charity chosen by the students.

So when it came time to plan this weekend's Plugged In event, in which 33 ensembles will perform tomorrow and Sunday nights, the students prepared pitches for 13 causes.

One, however, stood out, when 12-year-old electric guitarist Nelson Barnett of Belmont took the floor to talk about his younger brother Roland, who was born with a rare genetic condition called chromosome 15q duplication syndrome, or Dup15q for short.

This condition, which has rendered 9-year-old Roland nonverbal, with limited mobility and afflicted by up to 10 seizures a day, is estimated to affect 1 in 30,000 people. Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston recently opened the first multidisciplinary clinic in the world for people with the syndrome.

When it was Nelson's turn to nominate a charity, he set up a picture of himself pushing Roland in his stroller and started speaking to the roomful of teens and adults about his brother. In closing, he mentioned that Roland's birthday would fall within a week of the concert. Roland doesn't understand the concept of a birthday party, Nelson told the group, but he loves listening to music, and a concert in his honor would be a very meaningful way to celebrate him.

By an overwhelming majority, the other youths voted for the Dup15q Alliance to be the beneficiary of their winter concert, entitled "Believe."

Nelson's mother, Nancy, explained that her son found his way to Plugged In with some friends who are also home-schooled and wanted to form a rock band.

"He practices all the time and is very self-motivated," Nancy Barnett said. Nelson has studied electric guitar at the School of Rock in Watertown for the past two years, she said, and Plugged In complements his training by providing guidance on being part of a musical group.

For Nelson, educating his peers about Dup15q presented more than the usual challenges that a preteen might face regarding public speaking, his mother said.

"Nelson's pitch to a room full of rambunctious teenagers was incredibly brave. He had to speak about his brother's condition publicly for the first time," Nancy Barnett said. "It is very challenging to have a brother who has to be explained in advance to new friends coming over. Nelson's life will always revolve around thinking about his brother's needs, and the effects it has on us as a family.

"It takes a lot of guts for a sibling to step outside his comfort zone to advocate, protect, and ask for help for his brother or sister," she said. "We know Nelson is not alone in his efforts, and we are very proud of him and other kids who do similarly."

But Nelson, who says that becoming a rock star is just one of his many dreams for the future, sees it a little differently.

"When I found out that our concert was going to be a benefit and that we could propose charities, I didn't really have to go searching for a cause," he said. "It was right there in front of me.

"Not many of my friends at Plugged In know about Roland's condition, and there were a lot of people at the presentation who I didn't even know. So I was nervous, and I thought a bigger charity would win more votes. But my philosophy is that if you're the only person who can do something and you don't do it, it's not going to get done. So I just went up there and talked."

Money to benefit the Dup15q Alliance will be raised through the sale of T-shirts, CDs, and bracelets as well as ticket sales for the two "Believe" shows. Donations can also be made online at www.gofundme.com/believe.

"It's amazing that we have such a great response from our pre-fund-raising efforts," Nancy Barnett said. "We set an initial goal of \$3,000 and we've already exceeded that," even before ticket sales at the door.

"A lot of people tell me they saw Nelson's presentation to the group and it really moved them. Seeing the extent of Nelson's brotherly love, their sibling connection, motivates people to be interested in our situation."

The Plugged In bands will take turns performing from 6 to 11 p.m. tomorrow and Sunday at the Village Club, 83 Morton St. in Needham. For more information, call 781-956-4281 or go to www.pluggedinband.org.