



Dr. Laz engages his students in the arts through one-on-one attention, group performances such as the Black Light Theatre program (above right) and anything else that might provide inspiration.

Dr. Laz: Mediator, Musician, Mentor - and Arts Teacher of the Year

BY SUSAN F. DAVIS

Dr. David Lazerson, or "Dr. Laz" as he likes to be called, is a writer. And he's a songwriter, a guitar player, a drummer, a peace-maker, an expert at slapstick comedy, a band director and even a lifeguard instructor. But, his most important job title isn't listed here. Dr. Laz is – in the purest sense of the word – a teacher.

Yes, this dynamic man with a deep love for and understanding of the profoundly mentally retarded, the autistic, the medically fragile, the trainable mentally retarded and the Down's syndrome child is truly a shining star in the Broward County School District, where he has been chosen the Broward County Arts Teacher of the Year for 2007.

"Think outside the box has always been my motto," Dr. Laz shares. "I will do whatever, whenever to reach my kids." And so he does. He is the developer of a program called "Sing and Sign," where even the children who lack verbal skills can participate

in energetic musical programs. The children use American Sign Language to sign right along to the songs. "Unlike myself, they never forget a sign!" Dr. Laz laughingly notes.

Additionally, Dr. Laz uses every "bell and whistle" he possibly can to allow each and every child to experience music, drama or art. His classroom is a veritable treasure trove of adaptive switches, lights for signals to students, multi-sensory buttons, sound equipment and the list goes on. Through grants from Broward County, as well as more than 10 national grants that he wrote, he has been able to really develop his experiential music program, which included a Black Light Theatre program for his students. "Just watching these kids perform is pure joy and inspiration," Dr. Laz says. And, he announces, "We are taking our act on the road to other schools here in Broward

County!" You can hear in his voice his personal excitement for his students as they undertake yet another creative venture.

Currently, Dr. Laz teaches at the Quest Center in Broward County. He credits his first principal there, Linda Walker, for empowering him to develop innovative programs for his students. It quickly became evident to Dr. Laz that Walker meant every word, as he was allowed to start each day with 30 minutes of music for the children, invite guest musicians in to play along with any and all participants and take frequent field trips.

"I realized early on how important it was to try to bridge the gap between special needs students and the community. It's a win-win situation since it's good for the kids, and in an entirely different way – it's good for the members of the community to see these students out and about," Dr. Laz explains. "The community

soon realizes that these kids can truly give to others and make meaningful contributions!" He is particularly proud of a recycling program he and his students developed. They travel to specified spots in the county collecting cans and bottles. "The kids love it, and they automatically teach and inspire others to recycle."

When Walker retired from the Quest Center, Raquel Cobb was hired as principal. Cobb is a musician herself who frequently drops in to "jam" with Dr. Laz and his kids. He describes her as "both a multi-talented musician and caring administrator who understands the appeal of music to every single person or kid on the planet." Dr. Laz quickly acknowledges that having a principal who is so actively involved with his musical programs is truly a gift. "She's helped me take our music program to the next level," he says. "Not too many teachers can say they play in the school band with their principal!"

If Dr. David Lazerson's name sounds familiar, it certainly should. During the Crown Heights Riots of the mid-'80s in New York, Dr. Laz found himself in the unlikely role of peacemaker. He was called upon to sit down with the black leaders of the community as the representative of the Jewish community. He was already well-known for his attitudes

of mutual respect, tolerance and peace. Now, he clearly recognizes what a difficult task he was assigned, but like everything else he does, David Lazerson approached this daunting mission with optimism, energy and a complete air of acceptance and tolerance. He chronicled his experiences during this time of unrest in the book *Sharing Turf*, which ultimately became the basis for Showtime's screenplay for the movie *Crown Heights*, starring Howie Mandel as Dr. Laz.

As if he didn't have enough on his plate, Dr. Laz is also a founding member of the band Dr. Laz and the Cure. This group plays all over the world sharing a strong message of peace and harmony. Many of the band's greatest hits are original pieces written by Dr. Laz and were used, in fact, in the *Crown Heights* movie. Amazingly enough, Dr. Laz never really studied music except as a child taking piano lessons at the behest of his parents. Finally, he was given drum lessons, which led to his love of percussion.

His educational credentials are many. He holds a Ph.D. in education research and evaluation with a minor in urban education, a Master's degree in special education and a Bachelor of Science in American Studies. Additionally, he holds a Bachelor of Divinity from the Rabbinical College of America.

Currently, Dr. Lazerson is at work on his new book, titled *Singing for Angels*. "It's all about the fun, cool, eye-opening experiences I've had working with these special needs kids," Lazerson states.

As impressive as his educational background is, and as entertaining and revealing as his books are, they just cannot do credit to this man who risks everything every day to reach these special needs students. "I once dropped a huge box in my classroom," he shares. "It made a horrible noise, and as I looked around, I noticed one of my students who had no verbal skills whatsoever was laughing uproariously. After that day, I'd walk into walls, drop things, trip, anything to hear that precious laughter just one more time."

And that sums it up nicely. This man is a gift to his students and to Broward County Schools. When he was presented with the news that he had been named the Broward County Arts Teacher of the Year, he said he was just overwhelmed. Clearly, Dr. Laz teaches from his heart with an amazing love and respect for his students. With his non-stop energy, endless creativity, willingness to serve and boundless sense of humor, he truly shines – just as a star should.★

Susan F. Davis is a writer and retired drama teacher.



To learn more about Dr. Laz, visit his website at www.drlaz.com