Tugging on heartstrings

A violin instructor teaches her students to serve the community with music BY ANJALI BHAT

metronome ticks at freshman Amritha Anand's feet as she concentrates Lon the sheet music in front of her — Charles Dancla's "Airs Variés" — and rapidly plays the notes on her violin. This is the song her teacher, Xiaoli Chen, has asked her to rehearse for their upcoming recital at the senior center.

"There is nothing better than being able to give your music. To give what you know to the people," Chen said. "To learn a performing art, and perform for people."

ity that musicians have in bringing it to the

community. Music is joy, and her students —

whether they are three or 18 or anywhere in

remain so passionate about their music be-

cause they play for people who are able to

enjoy it too. While she loves to perform, she

has never loved standing under bright lights

in front of the dark expanse of a concert hall

and a faceless audience. She prefers to make music in places where she feels truly appreci-

ated: at retirement communities like Sunny

students. In their four years together, she

has found Chen's enthusiasm unrivaled. She

does not think that any other teacher be-

lieves so strongly in service through music. "I've definitely learned about having a

passion for playing," Kidambi said. "When

[Chen] plays, she has a smile on her face all

the time. And when my parents see me at

recitals, they want me to be like her, to enjoy

community. She first started playing in se-

nior centers when she left her job as a mu-

sic teacher at Mountain View elementary

schools in order to spend more time with her

daughter. But when she visited her sister, a

To Chen, music means giving back to the

Senior Neha Kidambi is one of Chen's

Chen thinks her students continue to

between — understand this.

View in Cupertino.

music so much."

This Chen's fundamental lesson to her students. believes She in the healing power of music and the responsibil-

FROM THEIR EYES I COULD HOW MUCH THEY APPRECIATED

violin teacher Xiaoli Chen

practiced. It's just showing off."

Instead, at the senior center, Chen watches her students become leaders. She notices

her students smiling warmly at the residents, carefully taking their hands and leading them to their seats. The residents are often excited to be the chief guests of the event.

Anand, Chen's student for over three years, feels instantly gratified by the residents' lively applause. She recalls one performance where residents appeared bored and quiet before anyone began to play. At the end



former employee at a retirement home, she learned that residents often expressed a desire for entertainment.

"I told them I played violin, and then I started playing for them," Chen said. "And from their eyes I could tell how much they appreciated it."

According to Chen, no matter what song is played — a show tune, a classical piece or a folk song — the residents always find a rhythm to clap their hands and tap their toes to. She wanted her students to have the same

> experience she did.

"You can rent empty an recital hall to perform the music," Chen said.

"But then, the only guests are the parents of the students. And they've already heard the students so many times from when they've

of the performance, however, everyone appeared to be in high spirits.

"It's so fun. I don't think [the residents] are exposed to kids that often," Anand said. "They say that they are stuck in their rooms without much to do. They all get so excited when they see us coming to play."

Chen's performing strategy has brought about visible change. In middle school, Kidambi wondered if she had the commitment to learn music like some of her peers. Learning the violin gave her the answer. In her own words, she is now "a better and more dynamic person." She now feels empowered by music and inspired to serve the community as her teacher taught her to.

Both Anand and Kidambi feel that Chen's encouragement helped them overcome a fear of performing in public.

"I do get a little nervous," Kidambi said. "I've always found it a little difficult to coordinate my brain and my hands together, but ... part of music is feeling it, and feeling passionate about it. So after I perform I feel like I've felt the music."

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DUET TOGETHER Violin teacher Xiaoli Chen and senior Neha Kidambi play Pachebel's "Canon" during a weekly practice at Chen's home. Chen and her students play both popular classical and contemporary songs for their recitals.

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