

Horse breeder helps students find their rhythm

The late John Cassim had two great passions in life: music and thoroughbreds, and found a unique way of connecting them.

By Nigel Bowen



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The late John Cassim, a University of Sydney graduate, was destined for a lifelong career in music pedagogy. He was one of the first music lecturers at Bathurst Teachers College, following its founding in 1951. After that, he served as head of the Music Department at Sydney Teachers College.

Music was always more than a nine-to-five job to John. In his spare time, he put on annual music productions at Sydney Teachers College and conducted operas and musicals for the Sydney Opera Company, the precursor to Opera Australia.

While his passion for music never dimmed, he eventually switched his career from teaching to equine breeding, establishing a thoroughbred stud in Mittagong.

He found a number of ingenious ways to combine his two great enthusiasms, such as playing opera to his equine charges. But his most enduring contribution was using some of the money he made as a breeder of champion racehorses to fund awards to promote music education.

The John Cassim Creative Arts Award: Music, which commenced in 2006, is awarded annually to two outstanding University of Sydney students who show promise in music pedagogy. Meanwhile, the John Cassim Award for Music Education, which commenced in 2011, is awarded to an exceptional Sydney Conservatorium of Music student, at the discretion of the dean and principal.

Best friends Emma Graham and Michelle Loui were surprised and delighted when they received the 2013 John Cassim Creative Arts Award: Music.

“You’re nominated by the academics who run the course rather than applying, so we didn’t know about it until we got an email with the good news,” says Emma. “We were the nerds in the class who put a lot of effort into all the assignments.”

“I was even more surprised than Emma to win a music award because, unlike her, I’m not even a musician,” laughs Michelle. “But I am passionate about incorporating all the creative arts into my teaching.”

Win for teaching

After she got over the surprise, Michelle was “quite chuffed” to have been recognised for her achievements while Emma also sees it as a victory for music teaching.

Emma wrote her honours thesis on what’s called the ‘music crisis’, the poor implementation of music teaching at primary schools.

“This is despite undeniable evidence showing how academically beneficial music is to young children,” she says. “So, just when I was thinking no-one really cared about exposing children to the creative arts, it was great to discover someone did, and was even prepared to donate money to encourage it.”

Though both Emma and Michelle were free to spend the award money in any way they wished, both chose to invest it in classroom resources.

“My friends think I’m weird because I spend most of my pay on teacher resources,” says Michelle. “When the award money arrived, I used it to buy musical instruments, puppets, drama props and books for my students. I’ve got everything I need, so I spend any spare money on stuff for school.”

Emma also invested the award money in classroom equipment.

“I thought it should be spent on something musical and worthwhile so I bought percussion instruments and CDs. There aren’t many music resources available in schools, so it’s good to have some more, which will hopefully get a lot of use in the years to come.”

Emma is currently working at Gynea Bay Primary School.

“It’s my old school,” she explains. “That’s where I first got into music and where I’m now trying to inspire others about it. Part of the reason I was interested in primary school teaching is that I figure it’s too late by the time kids are in high school, you’ve got to get them while they’re young!”

Michelle, who grew up and still lives in Western Sydney, teaches at Shelley Public School in Blacktown.

“I was offered a position at a school in North Sydney but I wanted to stay loyal to Shelley, which is where I did my internship. I work at a great school that has lovely kids and a supportive community around it. I was brought up in the public school system and am strongly committed to it.”

When it comes to future plans, Emma is thinking about following in John Cassim’s (initial) footsteps and undertaking a PhD, with the intention of securing an academic position and training future generations of music teachers. Michelle is interested in spending some time as a teacher in Asia.

Wherever their respective career paths take them, both will have a profound sense of gratitude towards John Cassim, who sadly passed away shortly after the 2013 award winners were announced.

“Unfortunately we never got to meet him,” says Michelle. “After he died, Emma and I wrote letters, which were passed on to his family, expressing our gratitude and explaining what the money was used for.”

“I’ll always remember the presentation ceremony,” says Emma. “Our families came along to the Great Hall to watch us receive our award. By funding these awards, John Cassim didn’t just support us – he publicly recognised the value of music in education, and showed that it’s something worth investing in.”

Improving the classroom: Emma Graham is pictured left with students.
Photography: Louise Cooper