

KEVIN RIORDAN

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Kevin Riordan: She spreads positivity through her music



Kevin Riordan, Inquirer Columnist
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Professional saxophonist and songwriter Susan Goodman battles bullying and bias with music.

Her powerful playing and pungent lyrics energize "Stand Up! Speak Out!," her educational program, and *Live Out Loud*, her new CD.

The Northfield, Atlantic County, resident makes tunes with titles like "Prejudice Is the Enemy" go down easy.

"Susan came here last October to play for 500 students at an assembly. I wasn't sure it was going to go over," says Michele Klamerus, the student assistance coordinator at Henry P. Becton Regional High in East Rutherford, N.J.

"But they weren't bored the way they might be by a speaker" about bullying, Klamerus adds. "I got a lot of good feedback."

I can imagine Goodman, a devoted in-line skater, knowing how to work a crowd of high school kids. She's the mother of two young-adult sons, and she's as lively in person as she is on record.

"This is where my passion for music meets my passion for social justice," says Goodman, 59, who's performed "several hundred" times for teachers and kindergarten through 12th-grade students.

"I'm promoting acceptance," she says. "Everyone should be welcome and safe, certainly in our public schools."

Goodman grew up playing wind instruments in Bloomfield, Essex County, during the 1960s, when anti-Semitism was more open, she says. Her Jewish faith and a speech impediment deepened her consciousness of being different.

"My parents had first cousins who died in the Holocaust," she says. "I grew up with an awareness of justice, and fairness."

After high school, Goodman studied music privately in Vancouver, British Columbia, and Vermont, and fell in love with the soprano sax after moving to Boston in the 1970s.



Susan Goodman and the saxophone she plays during her anti-bullying, anti-bias presentations to K-12 students. (Kevin Riordan / Staff)

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"I was listening to Wayne Shorter, and when I got into his older stuff, I had to play tenor [saxophone], because I wanted to play the great ballads."

(*Live Out Loud* shows that jazz influence as well as Goodman's love of world music. There's even hip-hop in the mix, particularly in the gritty groove of "Bein' Brave.")

Goodman moved to South Jersey to play in Atlantic City casinos. She made four CDs of original music for children, but began writing more political songs after the Columbine murders and Bosnian genocide of the 1990s.

The Tyler Clementi tragedy inspired her to become a full-time anti-bullying advocate.

Goodman's empathy for the Rutgers University student, who killed himself in 2010 after his roommate used a webcam to spy on him being intimate with a man, was deepened by the fact that her younger son, Miles G. Jackson, is gay.

"Tyler's death just tore me up," says Goodman, who was later energized when New Jersey "stepped up to the plate" with its Anti-Bullying Bill of Rights legislation.

"It was enumerating and addressing specific biases," such as homophobia, she says. "I thought, 'I want to address it.' So I wrote a song, called 'Ally,' about straight kids being allies with gay kids."

From New York, where he recently graduated from New York University, Miles, 21, says: "My mother is kind of obsessed, in a good way, with making a difference any way she can. The way that she can is musically, which is more appealing to me, and a lot of people, than lecturing.

"I know I'm lucky to have someone like her. And I know that the little Mileses in the world will be better off because of what she's doing."

His mother is careful to characterize her agenda as inclusive.

"I don't portray myself as an advocate specifically for gay rights. I'm an advocate for kids!" she says.

"Every kid has a right to an education in a safe space, and kids who are bullied are being robbed of that right."

That's why she doesn't pull punches in her lyrics. Consider "Cyber Sniper," which was inspired by the Clementi case:

Do you feel so weak and small

Do you only feel the power

When you watch somebody fall.

Despite its serious concerns, Goodman's *Live Out Loud* CD is upbeat. Like the woman who made it.

"With this work, I'm expressing my most authentic self. And I'm encouraging kids to be their most authentic selves," she says. "It's like when parents ask me what instruments their kids should play. I tell them, 'They should play what they love.' "

Contact Kevin Riordan at 856-779-3845 or kriordan@phillynews.com, or follow on Twitter @inqkriordan. Read the metro columnists' blog, "Blinq," at www.phillynews.com/blinq.

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