

# Interview with Suzanne Lichtenstein

## ABOUT

### How does your service stand out?

Welcome to our Piano School! Our piano program is the only one in the area that combines private and group instruction every single week, giving our students the special combination of Skills and Socialization they need to really LOVE piano!

Learning an instrument is hard work, and students need this combination of Know-How and Friends to encourage them to do what it takes to succeed. Our students do succeed, and they love the process!!!

### What do you enjoy about the work you do?

My favorite moments in teaching come when I see that happy light in my students' eyes, that comes when they have learned something new. I strive for that at every lesson!

Another thing I love is seeing their joy and enthusiasm when they meet with their piano buddies each week in the group class. Their smiles and eagerness to sit together during class make me so happy for them!

And, of course, seeing their victorious grins when they have been working hard on a piece of music, and it is finally coming together for them — that is a wonderful, exciting moment for all of us!!!

I know I am making a difference in these students' lives.

- They are learning that hard work pays off.
- They are learning that making music is more fun than just listening to it.
- They are learning that appreciating beauty helps them appreciate and love others.
- They are learning focus and analytical skills.
- And they are learning that piano is a fine-motor sport, and that they need to take care of their bodies and stay in good shape.

My hope is they will still be playing piano when they are 99 or 101 years old, still loving life, and still loving to learn new things! Piano is awesome training for a life lived fully!

Helping students achieve all that makes my job meaningful. It's so much more than just teaching piano! It's equipping my students for life!

## QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

### **What is your typical process for working with a new student?**

At the first lesson with a new student, I learn about their learning styles, their hobbies, and their skill set. Next we begin learning about pitch and rhythm, the two most basic fundamentals of music. Then we examine a beginning songbook that has familiar tunes, to see how music is put together, how music is coded, and what its most important rules are. Finally, the student chooses a song to learn and take home to practice. The process might sound boring, but it is always very interesting, and a time of discovery!

### **What education and/or training do you have that relates to your work?**

I began violin, piano, and voice lessons at approximately age 3. Music has a basic code of seven notes and, once that code is learned, it is possible to play as many instruments as one desires. It just takes practice to learn each instrument. So, I have also played and enjoyed many other instruments!

By high school, piano had become my great love, and I began studying to become a teacher with the Suzuki Association of the Americas in the Washington, DC, area. During those years, I taught a few students. Of course I was very young, and wanted to try other career fields as well.

So, during college and my first years after, even though I continued with music study and teaching, I also studied and worked in other fields, primarily International Relations, Law, and Business. Those experiences proved very useful to me when I finally turned my attention back to what mattered most to me: Teaching piano.

Since January 2008, I have focused full-time on piano and enriching the lives of my students with music, beauty, and an appreciation for others. Of course, my students are also improving their thinking skills, dexterity, and executive functioning skills as well!

In the Suzuki Method, it is believed that a Teacher must never stop learning. Because of this, I continue to improve my teaching and music skills through workshops, seminars, and private lessons. I hold certificates of completion from Piano Basics, the Suzuki training program established by Dr. Haruko Kataoka, who was the founder of the piano program at Dr. Shinichi Suzuki's Talent Education Institute in Matsumoto, Japan. The certificates must be renewed every two years, to show that our training is current, and that we are striving to become the best teachers we can be.

**Do you have a standard pricing system for your lessons? If so, please share the details here.**

I encourage students and parents to email me about my tuition rates, rather than posting them online. The most important thing to know is that students receive two hours of instruction per week.

That might seem like a lot, but it's one of the reasons why my students love piano, and why my quit rate is so exceedingly low. My students are fully supported in their learning: Their one-hour private lesson ensures that they confidently know what they are doing, before they go home to practice all week. Then, the one-hour group lesson allows them to share what they are learning with other students, so they benefit from each other's learning.

They also, of course, make friends with other piano students at the group lessons. That is so important!!! The social aspect is missing in a lot of piano programs, which is why so many students quit piano to go play team sports, or play in a band or orchestra, or become involved in some other group activity.

Kids need friendships. That's what makes all the hard work worth it to them! Parents see the long-term benefits of music study. Kids don't. They need a more immediate benefit when the work gets tough, and the group lesson each week is the answer.

Plus, they are learning important presentation skills in the group lessons, when they play for each other. Those presentation skills will help them later in life, in any career they go into!

**How did you get started teaching?**

It was my mother's idea, originally! I was about 14 years old, and my mother asked if I would be interested in taking teacher-training classes in a Summer Training Institute with the Suzuki Association of the Americas. She had also helped me get started in a small business of my own, two years prior, and had enrolled me and my younger brother in some non-degree extension classes at the college where she taught. She certainly was an advanced thinker!

Of course, I said yes. When we showed up that first day, everyone assumed my mother was the person coming for training. They were quite astonished when my mother presented me and said, "No, she is." The classes were extremely interesting, and I enjoyed them very much. I took classes at the Institute for two summers in a row. At the end of the first summer, they told me I was the youngest teacher-trainee they had ever had. I felt quite a burden to behave responsibly, so they would allow other young teachers to study!

### **What types of students have you worked with?**

I have worked with students of many ages and backgrounds. No student is too young or too old! Everyone has music inside them, and it is my job to show them how to find it, and help them nurture and develop it. With some students, it is very hard, especially severely autistic children. Most people find it easily, though, and then it's just a matter of teaching them how to practice! Consistency is the key to that: A little bit a day goes a long way.

### **Describe a recent event you are fond of.**

One of my favorite memories is of a mom emailing me, to tell me her daughter had requested a piano cake for her birthday!

I could also mention all the times my students have earned Superiors and Superior-Pluses at Festival. Mind you, Superiors are very rare at Festival, and Superior-Pluses aren't supposed to happen!

Yes, those are proud moments. But it's the times like the piano birthday cake that make me happiest of all. I love seeing my students excited about learning piano!

### **What advice would you give a student looking to hire a teacher in your area of expertise?**

Attend a teacher's recital, if at all possible, and see how the students do. Watch the worst student, not the best! Dr. Kataoka always said that a teacher is only as good as the worst student!

Also, watch how the teacher interacts with the students, and with the parents. The teacher's relationship skills are extremely important.

Remember that worst student? That child is just as precious as the best student. See how the teacher treats that child. See if the student is being congratulated on doing their best, no matter how badly the performance went. Music touches the heart, which means that a music teacher has tremendous influence over the development of a child. So, it is extremely important that the teacher show unconditional love to every student.

## **What questions should students think through before talking to teachers about their needs?**

Think thoroughly about what your motivation is in taking lessons. It is fine if the parent is the one wanting the lessons for the child, because learning an instrument will be good for them. It will be!

It will also be fun, but it will be hard fun. Hard fun? Yes, hard fun. Someone once said that eating ice cream is easy fun, but eating steak is hard fun. It takes more work, but it is very enjoyable.

So, that is why it is important to examine your motivation. Do you realize this will be hard fun? Do you realize this will take just as much work as soccer, baseball, or any other sport? Piano is a fine-motor sport. It will take repetition, thinking, and consistency. Practicing at least a few minutes a day, for at least four days a week, is needed to succeed.

Naturally, practicing seven days a week is the way to really grow. Dr. Suzuki always said, "Practice only on the days you eat." If we want to grow, that's good advice!

We don't need to practice for a long time every day — even 5-10 minutes a day for a beginner goes a long way. But the practice needs to be consistent, or the student will become frustrated and want to quit. It is up to the parent to be the one to enforce practice. If the student practices often enough, then the student is guaranteed to love piano!!!

So, Dear Parent, realize that your child will not always want to practice. But it is the practice that will help your child learn to love piano. Isn't that ironic? It's like telling your child, "Eat your vegetables, so you will grow strong." Keep reminding your child of the future benefits of practicing piano, and trust that he or she will grow into someone who truly loves piano.