

Rock star chucks it all to pursue true passion: teaching

By Heather Hudson

Most musicians would give anything to quit their day jobs and live like a rock star. But for new HWDSB teacher Sean Kelly, it was the other way around.

As guitarist and vocalist for the Juno-nominated band Idle Sons, Kelly knows what it's like to cram into a van with three other guys and tour the country. He has sweated under hot lights before a screaming audience in venues as small as a bar and as big as a stadium. He's even navigated the cut-throat music industry and recorded an album in Hollywood.

What better preparation for standing in front of a classroom of unruly Grade 6 students?

Kelly and his hockey buddies formed Idle Sons back in high school when they were looking to try something new. They played small gigs "all over the place" and were mentored by their friends, the wildly successful band Finger Eleven, who helped them make demos and took them on tours around southern Ontario.

By the time he graduated from university, the music industry was starting to show interest. "The week I finished school, some representatives from Atlantic Records from the states flew up to check us out. They took us out and signed us shortly after that."

After six months in California, they came home with a finished album and a long wait ahead of them. While Atlantic Records decided whether they would release the record, Idle Sons continued to write and set up their own tours in Canada and the U.S. After 18 months, they negotiated their way out of their contract, resigned with EMI and Virgin and put a record out with them. From there, the small tours turned into national ones in bigger arenas with bands like Three Days Grace.

But even while he was riding the ups and downs of a career in music, he never forgot the one he left behind before it had even gotten started. Finally, almost two years ago, he made the decision to leave the band and begin teaching.

"It wasn't for me anymore. I enjoyed what we did but I kind of always told myself that by the time I approached 30 that I was going to settle into a career job. Teaching was always the kind of thing I wanted to do with my life. This [music] opportunity just fell in my lap when I was finishing university and I had to go with it. I would have been kicking myself if I didn't try it out."

Returning to Burlington, Kelly volunteered in his friends' classrooms, tried out different grades and made sure teaching was what he wanted get back into.

Now on an LTO teaching Grade 6 at Gordon Price Elementary School, Kelly says he couldn't be happier with his decision.

“Teaching is a dream come true. I’ve accomplished a lot of little goals that I had for my life with music, but, to be honest, that doesn’t compare to what I’m doing now. This is a much bigger deal for me than anything else I’ve ever done.”

Bill Yull, principal of Gordon Price, says Kelly’s enthusiasm and commitment shines through.

“Sean is a natural teacher. He exudes energy and excitement and goes the extra mile to build relationships. I haven’t seen kids take to a teacher like this in many years. I would hire him in a New York minute to a permanent contract if I had a position.”

Throwing himself into his new job, Kelly co-runs a math club and is a coach of the boys’ volleyball team. But just because he’s pursuing his calling in the classroom doesn’t mean music is not an important part of his life. He’s begun running jam sessions for Grades 6-8 students on nutrition breaks, which are a hit with a lot of kids.

“Every week it changes a little bit depending on which kids remember to bring instruments. If a kid’s never played a guitar before he can pick it up and try it out. Some kids just want to come and hang out and talk. Other kids are amazing musicians and want to come in and fuel a hobby of theirs. It’s a lot of fun. I enjoy it as much as the kids do.”

Of course, in a class full of curious Grade 6 students, his former career comes up now and again. Kelly says part of his good rapport with the kids is based on his commitment to be honest with them.

“I think they appreciate that they can ask me questions about when I was in the band and why I left. I tell them the truth – I’m not going to candy coat a story for them. I tell them that it might seem nice when you see it on TV but not everybody makes a lot of money doing it. If it’s something they’re really interested in or can help build their character or give them insight on something, I’m going to tell them about it.”

Kelly expects to be at Gordon Price until just before the holidays in December and says he’s eager to take on whatever comes his way in the education system after that. If his experience at the school has been any indication, he’s looking forward to a long and satisfying career.

“I’m trying to cram everything I can into this experience. The staff has been nothing but supportive and Mr. Yull has been amazing to me. It’s a great school. I couldn’t ask for a better start.”