

The Power of Music

ALEC GLASSER, FOUNDER OF THE DRAKE RESTAURANT, AIMS TO GIVE ORANGE COUNTY'S UNDERSERVED YOUTH A SHOT AT SUCCESS WITH DONATIONS FOR INSTRUMENTS AND INSTRUCTION THROUGH HIS NONPROFIT, THE DRAKE GIVES.

By ASHLEY RYAN



Alec Glasser, founder of The Drake Gives, which helps promote the importance of music

From an early age, Alec Glasser's passion for music permeated his life. As part of a program to desegregate schools, he spent nearly 40 minutes each day on a bus to Queens, New York. "I was just an average-sized white Jewish kid," he notes. "I couldn't make a lot of the sports teams. So I went into the band."

Glasser started learning saxophone in middle school during a time when public campuses had ample funding, ensuring that

it was part of the daily curriculum rather than an after-school program. "What I want is for kids to have the same access to music that I had in public school," he shares.

Glasser says that playing instruments in school (he also learned to play clarinet and flute) allowed him to break out of his shell. "It helped me socialize with other kids in the band and, through music and through the connection of playing music, ... get to know them," he explains, noting that he

has also experienced cognitive and emotional benefits from playing music.

He later started a garage band, performing at Sweet 16 parties and bar mitzvahs around the region as well as at resorts in the Catskill Mountains in the summertime. During high school, Glasser's father helped him secure a job as an elevator operator at the Drake Hotel, where his love for music grew as he rubbed elbows with big names like John Coltrane and Miles Davis.

Glasser went on to study political science and Russian at the University at Buffalo with the intention of becoming a foreign diplomat but, upon graduation and in light of the political turmoil over the Vietnam War, he headed west to attend law school at USC instead. But, roughly four decades later, a full circle moment occurred when he opened The Drake restaurant here in Laguna in 2019.

"The Drake Hotel had a dining room with a grand piano in the middle and all the tables were around it. And they had very, very high-level cuisine with music integrated into the experience," Glasser recalls. "Just simply having a restaurant didn't appeal to me. But copying what the Drake did—which is bring high-level food together with high-level music in a really cool, intimate, New York[-inspired] setting—that's what I wanted to do. Without the music, it just wouldn't work." Around 20 to 25 different performers now take the stage at The Drake each month.

But his vision didn't end there. A year after the restaurant opened, he founded The Drake Gives, a nonprofit dedicated to providing underserved youth with musical instruments and education. Through fundraising events, donations to Save The Music Foundation and a partnership with a nearby university, Glasser is making his dreams come true by helping keep music alive.

COURTESY OF THE DRAKE

STAYING IN TUNE

AS THE DRAKE GIVES FURTHER EXPANDS, FOUNDER ALEC GLASSER REMAINS DEDICATED TO ELEVATING MUSIC EDUCATION AT ALL LEVELS.



From left: students performing during The Drake Gives' check presentation ceremony for the Anaheim Union High School District; Glasser (left) and Jon Gould (right), dean of UC Irvine's School of Social Ecology, with students benefiting from the nonprofit's inaugural scholarship fund

SAVING THE MUSIC

Early on in the creation of The Drake Gives, founder Alec Glasser knew that he wanted to partner with Save The Music Foundation. "What they do is exactly what we wanted to do, which is provide underserved school districts with money for instruction and instruments," he explains. Multiyear commitments from the school districts ensure that these programs reach a great number of students; most recently, in January, The Drake Gives donated more than \$200,000 to the Anaheim Union High School District, which will be allocated to grants for recording/production technology and mariachi as well as new instruments. While initial contributions to Save The Music went into a national fund, the majority of the donations (over \$500,000 in total) have been directed to Los Angeles and Orange County campuses, with more than 7,000 children impacted in Southern California and 12,000 nationally. "The great part is visiting the kids, visiting the schools, ... [and] listening to their performances," Glasser adds.

A PROMISING PARTNERSHIP

While education is of top priority to the team running The Drake Gives, the nonprofit is exploring how music can be used in other industries as well. Through a partnership with the University of California, Irvine, two programs have been established. First, last year, The Drake Gives implemented a \$100,000 fund to support college students who plan to incorporate music in their future career paths; in its inaugural year, nine recipients benefited from the scholarship. The nonprofit and UCI's School of Social Ecology have also been hard at work creating the Center for the Power of Music, which will help inform people on the uses that sound can have in industries ranging from medicine, counseling or linguistics to sports, agriculture or marketing. "The more people understand the power of music—which is why we're doing what we're doing at UCI—the more music education will expand," Glasser notes. The group, which will soon launch a website and plans to open

a physical center on the UCI campus in the future, will also create a directory of music-related nonprofits in the U.S. and plans to spread awareness on how community problems can be solved through sound.

COMMUNITY CONNECTION

Each year, The Drake Gives hosts one or two fundraisers, typically held in the intimate space at The Drake restaurant—with plenty of live music, of course, and speakers from either the school districts with which the nonprofit is partnering (through Save The Music) or students affected by their programs. While these events net around \$150,000 for the nonprofit, Glasser says what he loves most is bringing supporters together with the people their donations are impacting. "There's a lot of really upbeat energy," Glasser says. "... It really integrates the community into what we're doing—getting people to understand the importance. That's the real value of [hosting these events]." Don't miss the next fundraiser at The Drake, slated for June 4. ■