

STRINGS THE THING

For seven students from O.C., a rigorous summer music camp will hone their abilities and transform their presence.

By KAITLIN WRIGHT
FOR THE REGISTER

With summer break just around the corner, many students are gearing up for camp. This year, seven Orange County students will spend two weeks in Three Rivers in Northern California at Center Stage Strings, an intensive summer music camp founded by renowned violinist Danielle Belen in 2010.

Since its inaugural year, the program has grown from a one-week course for 10 students to a two-week course for 24 students. Students from all over the country audition for a spot. Locals perform a live audition and those outside Southern California submit video auditions. Belen's program provides an opportunity for students to hone their skills through one-on-one instruction with prestigious professionals.

"The summer is a time for you to look inside yourself and see what you're made of as a musician," Belen said. Summer offers students time to really focus and transform their level of playing, she added.

Belen got her start at age 12 when she was in the Travis Ranch Middle School orchestra in Yorba Linda. From there, she advanced to Esperanza High School's orchestra under the direction of Kay Crask.

Crask saw something special in Belen and became her No. 1 fan. She arranged several opportunities for Belen to perform and was instrumental in her success.

Growing up, Belen performed at Disneyland and Knott's Berry Farm, and she also played with the Orange County Youth Symphony Orchestra for several years. While in college, Belen even traveled with the Pacific Symphony on its European tour. Her Orange County experiences molded her into the artist she is now, she says. "While I don't live (in Orange County) anymore, I will always have a connection there," Belen said. She now resides in Glendale with her husband.



PHOTOS: GEOFFRY GLASS

Student Adam Millstein and Center Stage Strings founder Danielle Belen perform at the camp last year.

Belen created the music camp with the hope that students would count the Center Stage Strings experience as a pivotal moment in their development as musicians. The idea for the program arose partly out of necessity. As a teacher at the Colburn School in Los Angeles, Belen wanted a camp to send her students to for the summer. The one she had attended in her youth had closed.

Her parents had retired to the community of Three Rivers, and Belen discovered that it's a beautiful "retreat where serious musical kids can escape the regular day-to-day routine and come to focus on their instruments and develop as young artists."

The community opened its doors to Belen and her students with several members of the community serving as host families.

The local Presbyterian church donated space for rehearsals and performances. This year, Center Stage Strings will move to a new location, where the students will live on campus.



Return camper Anna Vosbigian of Mission Viejo plays during a performance last year at Three Rivers.

A lot of summer music camps have the same mission as Center Stage Strings – to develop extraordinary musicians. Often, though, the programs revolve around an orchestra. The emphasis on individual refinement at Belen's camp presents a setting that gives a more personal experience.

Anna Vosbigian, 17, of Mission Viejo has attended Center Stage Strings every year since it began.

Her favorite part is the unlimited amount of time reserved for uninterrupted practice. Vosbigian, who plans to attend Northwestern University in the fall to study violin performance, said that her "life revolves around violin," and that Center Stage Strings helped with her confidence. She now knows that "there is more to playing music than just practicing the music notes."

At the Center Stage Strings camp, Belen and the other faculty members strive to turn students into "complete musicians." They practice everything from stage presence to sight reading and even public speaking.

Belen says that at Center Stage Strings, "Students can come as one type of violinist or cellist and actually leave a few weeks later as a very different level of player."

With concerts every couple of days, the students become accustomed to performing and emerge as mature artists. Belen hopes that two weeks of in-depth study will reinvigorate her students' passion and drive and allow them "to improve more than ever before."

Orange County students attending Center Stage Strings this summer are: Iona Batchelder, 14 (Irvine), Sena Cho, 10 (Irvine), Kevin Miura, 10 (Irvine), Philip Sheegog, 17 (Anaheim), Hannah Song, 13 (Irvine), Anna Vosbigian, 17 (Mission Viejo), and Hao Zhou, 16 (Mission Viejo).

Center Stage Strings is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization. The camp relies on donations to award students scholarships to attend camp. More information can be found online at CenterStageStrings.com.

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DANIELLE BELEN,
FOUNDER OF CENTER STAGE STRINGS



COURTESY OF CENTER STAGE STRINGS

Campers with Center Stage Strings enjoy an afternoon on the lake.