

Places & Faces

first person

with Huber “Mickey” Smith, Jr.
Inspiring Others to Discover Their Sound

by Angie Kay Dilmore, photo courtesy of Mickey Smith, Jr.

The name Mickey Smith, Jr. is synonymous with the word “music” throughout Southwest Louisiana. This dynamic, driven jazz man is passionate about music and education. He has been the band director at Maplewood Middle School since 2005. In addition to playing music and teaching, he supports organizations that promote music education for children; for examples, he is president of Musicmakers2U and a board member of Jazz in the Arts.

Smith has won dozens of awards, including KPLC’s Class Act Award and the Mayor’s 2018 Arts Award for Arts Educator of the Year. He has been a National Semi-Finalist for the Grammy Music Educator of the Year award in 2015, 2018, and again this year, where he has moved into the list of Top Ten contenders!

Smith lives in Sulphur with his wife, Eugenia, their daughter Mikayla, age 15, and son William, age 9. He recently shared with Thrive magazine his thoughts on playing his saxophone, his impact on his students, and the importance of finding one’s sound.



Tell us about your childhood, growing up in Mossville, La.

My childhood was great. Mossville was like Mayberry in the Andy Griffith show. Everybody knew everybody and kids were just free to be kids. That is where my sound on my saxophone was developed. There was such an essence of play that I don't often see in today's society. I had so many friends and family members and there was a strong sense of pride in the community. It's sad to me that the place where I grew up is now gone to industry.

When did you first realize you wanted to be a musician?

My mom put me in piano lessons when I was very young. I did not put my best effort into it because in our neighborhood, music was not celebrated. Boys played sports and peer pressure kicked in. So I didn't stick with piano. When I got to middle school, I was given another opportunity. I signed up for band. My grandmother purchased my instrument for me.

Describe your journey to becoming a music educator.

I attended McNeese on a music scholarship; first one in my family to go to college. I didn't start out as a music major, but I quickly realized, my heart was with music, and I changed my major to music education. I had an affinity for music and a desire to help young people, but it was when I did my student teaching at Oak Park Middle that I discovered I could impact students' lives in a special way and I fell in love with teaching. I saw it more as a mission than a vocation.

Middle school is a tough gig for most teachers. What do you love about teaching that age group?

I love their honesty, their enthusiasm. I love their perspective. They don't see things like we see them. They're very forgiving. They have a sense of discovery. Every day is an adventure. They still have child-like innocence, not old enough yet to be jaded, but they're not babies.

What changes have taken place at Maplewood Middle since you became band director?

Since 2005, there has been a 500% increase in the number of students who participate

in band. Out of a total student body of 320, 46% of the students are involved in the band program. It's not about numbers, but that is definitely something we celebrate. It gives us a unique opportunity to dictate the culture of the school as a whole. It's pretty interesting when we have a pep rally. Not too many kids are in the bleachers. The majority are either in the band or on the team. My aim is not only to teach but to use music as a vehicle to reach. We see growth because the kids feel like they matter. They are a part of something bigger than themselves. When teachers can not only instruct, but inspire, that's a game changer.

What is your greatest challenge as a middle school band director?

How do we, as music educators, articulate our value in a way that the community understands the value and significance of music education. It's more than what happens at half-time. We love half-time, but what we do is so much more than what happens on a Friday night.

Besides notes and scales, what do you strive to teach your students?

We use the acronym, BAND. Be your best, Aim for success, Never settle for less than your best, and Demand excellence. We try to help them grow the capacity to be intrinsically motivated and to help them be assured and build self-esteem. Music does that.

What is the most important lesson you've learned as a teacher?

Teaching is not just a job – it's a calling. I've learned that we all have a "sound." And by that, I don't necessarily mean music. It's about a person's unique significance. My sound is not my saxophone or the band. My sound is my ability to entertain or engage or to educate, to elevate my learners to excellence. Each child has a sound. My job is to help my students know his or her value.

Tell us about Musicmakers2U.

We collect donated instruments, clean and refurbish them, and give them to students who might not otherwise have a chance to play music. Thus far, through Musicmakers2U (MM2U), over 400 kids have been outfitted with instruments. I wonder sometimes, how different my

life would be today if my grandmother hadn't given me my first instrument. My organization Sax in the City is a fundraiser for MM2U. Music with a mission.

You recently wrote, illustrated, and published a children's book, The Adventures of Little Mickey: Keep on Going. Tell us about that.

I want to help secure the legacy of Mossville and have a positive impact on the community. I want to encourage my students to Keep on Going, a mantra my mom taught me.

Tell us about your new program, Sound 180.

The past couple years, I have taken my music and my message to other educators. Resources are poured into the schools, but the people who pour into the students are often left empty. We have a lot of teacher burnout. I developed a program called Sound 180, meaning 180 days (the length of a school year) of classroom instruction and harmony. I do professional development and speaking for school districts across the country and host an online support community for educators, providing motivation and practical tips and solutions. We want to help teachers be successful in the classroom.

What would winning the Grammy Award for Music Educator of the Year mean to you?

In college, they asked us what we wanted to do with our careers. I said I wanted to be the absolute best teacher possible for my students. All these years later, life continues to teach me to strive for excellence and be a "sound" to change my students' world. For me, winning this award would mean that for one moment in time I was indeed the absolute best educator I could be for my students. I told my family that if I lost we would come together and celebrate and if I won we would come together and celebrate. So either way, no matter what, we will celebrate, because God is faithful.

The 2019 Grammy Awards take place on February 10. Thrive magazine wishes Mickey Smith, Jr. all the best! Find him on his website, mickeysmithjr.com or on social media, @mickeysmithjr.