

Popular Warkworth piano teacher grew up surrounded by music

After retiring Lesle Campbell simply moved the classroom right into her own living room

by Paul Dalby
THE INDEPENDENT

AFTER 34 YEARS of teaching kids in the school classroom, you'd think that Lesle Campbell was looking forward to some peace and quiet in her retirement years.

But then you obviously don't know Lesle Campbell.

After leaving Percy Centennial Public School for the last time in 2000, she decided to teach the kids of the village something new - music.

Her gracious home on old Hastings Road in Warkworth echoes day and night to the sounds of her grand piano being played by a parade of students.

Delightful or discordant, it's all music to Ms. Campbell's ears.

called. "My lessons cost 75 cents and my mother was so determined that I should play the piano because she couldn't."

She remembers her teacher vividly. "Her name was Lulu Knight and she kept her fingernails painted bright red. I couldn't tear my eyes off those fingernails moving up and down the keyboard."

Lulu Knight was a gentle, kindly person who treated her nervous students with warm encouragement. It's become the trademark of her student Lesle McCleary, now Lesle Campbell, 55 years later.

"I don't teach Conservatory standard, I'm not interested in exams because a lot of kids just get turned off if they have to practise the



Piano teacher Lesle Campbell surrounded by some of her music students after giving their graduation concert at the St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church in Warkworth. She says "it's so much fun watching them learn how to make music".

They range in age from five to 35 and when Ms. Campbell stages her graduation concert each summer in the village's Presbyterian Church, the pews are crowded with proud families looking on.

It is the culmination of a year's work in Ms. Campbell's front room on the grand piano her uncle Jim left her in his will. It's difficult to say who is more proud of the students' newfound keyboard skills - the parents or Ms. Campbell?

The graduation concert is the payback for all those morning and afternoon lessons, trudging up to the house on the hill for a half-hour of tutoring, encouragement and some fresh-baked cookies.

The music lessons for the

children of Warkworth have taken on a new significance this past year after Ms. Campbell lost her husband Stuart, a noted bee-keeper and bon vivant, to cancer. Music has soothed the soul.

"It's just so much fun watching them learn how to make music," she said.

"And it's good to be able to do something when you're old. Sports are limited for me but music is something you can do all your life," said Ms. Campbell, who at 61 may be over-stating the "old" bit.

She likes to tell visitors that she's not "a real piano player herself."

Anyone who has heard her accompany the Donegal Fiddlers, jam in a bar with the Stone Angel band, accompany the Fifties Show at

the Brighton Barn or play church organ on Sundays would surely beg to differ with this overly modest assessment.

In fact it's a physical impossibility for Ms. Campbell not to play the piano night and day. It's in her genes, you see.

She was taught to chord by her aunt Mary Hermiston and her cousin is noted opera singer Nancy Hermiston. Growing up she would sit in with her uncle George Potter, who led a popular Fifties dance band long before he and his wife Alice started the sugar bush maple syrup farm outside Warkworth.

"My ear for playing is a gift from the Potter family," she said. "As a child, I was surrounded by music. It was

there all the time and it became a part of me."

She also discovered that polishing her piano skills paid off another important dividend: "The family was always telling me you don't have to do the dishes, just go and pay the piano. They still say that to me today."

Ms. Campbell spent her life teaching in schools as far afield as Oshawa and Port Hope, Garden Hill and Newcastle until she worked her way home to Warkworth. Now the kids come to her and she couldn't be happier.

"Every once in a while, a kid comes along that has a real talent," she said. "One girl who is studying with me right now is amazing, she's got the ear. It's very exciting."



Lesle Campbell often uses a fiddle to help tutor students like Kaylee Newman, on chording techniques.

"It takes me right back to when I started studying piano at the age of five here in Warkworth," she re-

same piece for a whole year," she explained. "But I can teach kids and I get music out of them."

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