

# Can't be a guitar slinger without a guitar

Guitars for Kids Wpg helps kids from low-income families get their first real six-strings

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Ashley McCurdy (SUPPLIED PHOTO)

Are you the parent of a potential Jimi or Eddie, but don't have the financial means for a Fender? Don't fret. Guitars for Kids Wpg is a non-profit organization that aims to afford acoustics and axes for adolescents living in the city's lower-income areas.

"I'm a guitar teacher and I live in the North End," says Ashley McCurdy, 36, founder of Guitars for Kids Wpg. "I've taught for different organizations, Boys and Girls Club, Manitoba Métis Federation, so I've dealt with lots of kids, and I've noticed over the years the programs provide guitars for the kids to play — but when those kids go home they have nothing to practice on. These days, guitars are fairly cheap — like \$100 — but for a low-income family \$100 might as well be a \$1,000, because they just don't have it."

Intended for youths ages 10 to 17 living in the North End, the West End, Elmwood and Point Douglas, Guitars for Kids Wpg tracks down used and damaged guitars, fixes them and gives them away to deserving students. But this isn't something for nothing.

"I don't just want to give them the guitar, I want it to keep going," says McCurdy, who plays in Mr. McCurdy and Buckethitch and was a coordinator for Winnipeg independent music festival Corefest. "I don't want it sitting in the corner after a month, so I give them a free lesson, I give them a booklet and, if they want more lessons from me, I'll give them a break. Also, I want to be a mentor so I'll follow up with them. If I have to go see them and give them another lesson, I'm down with that."

McCurdy says kids go over the moon when gifted a guitar and parents are equally ecstatic, especially for the non-musical benefits an instrument provides.

"Never mind the learning of a skill, studies have shown that children who play a musical instrument get better grades and are less likely to get in trouble — benefits the kids don't even realize," McCurdy says. "Also, their self-esteem goes up. It's a social thing. You can play with someone else or for your parents; it brings kids out of their shell even after playing. I'm at the Boys and Girls Club once a week and one of the full-time staff members told me, 'We can't believe you got this kid to talk because he doesn't talk to anyone.'"

While Guitars for Kids Wpg is just McCurdy at this point, he hopes to expand the organization so no underprivileged Winnipeg kid goes guitar-less.

"It sounds cheesy, but I want to try and give back to my community," McCurdy says. "I grew up, live and work in the North End, I've worked with these North End kids and I want to give back to them directly, so I'm starting there. If it branches out and encompasses the whole city, that's cool, but for now I want to focus on these lower-income areas."

Learn how to apply for a guitar, donate a guitar or volunteer (repairs, drop-offs) at <http://guitarsforkidswpg.webs.com>.

By Jared Story

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