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What's Your Passion? – Tony Costa Teaches Guitar, *and Something More*

Many of the children at the Mbirizi Primary School, near Masaka, Uganda, had never seen a guitar in person. But by the week's end, they were playing basic chords and beginning to learn more about themselves and what they could achieve.

That's thanks to associate Tony Costa, who in June traveled to the rural area of Uganda to support Sylvia's Children.

The nonprofit organization was begun by Tony's mom to support education in the AIDS-ravaged area. The disease has left many children orphaned. Some as young as 11 work to support their siblings; others are living on the streets. The goal of Sylvia's Children is to provide as many children as possible with an education at the Mbirizi Primary School.

"My mom asked my sister and I to join her on a trip to the school as a Christmas gift to her, so we could see first-hand what *her* passion was all about," says Tony, who works in Broker Dealer Operations in Iselin, NJ.

But now he realizes the trip really was a gift to him.

As he was getting ready for his visit, Tony decided he wanted to do more than "tour" the school and local area – he wanted to roll up his sleeves and get to work.

"I wanted to share something special with the students and teachers, and teaching guitar was a natural fit," says Tony.

Tony is a musician in his spare time, having studied music for much of his life and having played guitar in both local bands and as a solo performer. He also has been teaching music for the past six years.

Before leaving for the trip, Tony organized a drive to collect donated guitars for the school and gathered 17 in all. While there was some time to sightsee, much of Tony's visit to Uganda was spent in the classroom providing instructions to both the students and the teachers.

"Everyone was so excited," says Tony. "Guitars are expensive there, so none of the kids had ever had a chance to play one. What was special too was that the music teacher had always loved the sound of the guitar and had dreamed of playing one day."

Tony was able to teach the group basic guitar-playing techniques during his time with them. "Kids are kids. They wanted to play, learn and have fun."

He adds, "What I love about teaching music is seeing the spark in a student's eyes when he or she gets it, and seeing that you have helped ignite something in them that wasn't there before – maybe a love of music, or an expanded view of how they see themselves and their possibilities."

Tony learned a lot during his visit too.

“I really appreciated the dedication of the teachers. They understand just how important education is to these kids’ future. There are no public programs or safety nets here. Education is everything.”

If Tony ignited a spark in his students, they returned the favor.

“What has left me a different person is the sense of community and joy I found there, amidst very simple living and homes with thatched roofs and clean dirt floors. It was beautiful and inspiring.”

Tony plans to return to the school next summer, but for now he’s keeping the teaching going long-distance. Just recently, he mailed a video with more guitar lessons to the school. The music teacher there is committed to helping his students become full-fledged guitarists.

That’s music to Tony’s ears.







