

MURRIETA: School psychologist also a virtuoso

Diego Mondragon brings love of music to job

By CRAIG SHULTZ - Staff Writer | Tuesday, January 6, 2009 8:28 PM PST ∞



Diego Mondragon, a psychologist at Chaparral High School and a talented violin player, uses music to help the teens he works with. (Photo by Andrew Foulk - For The Californian)

MURRIETA ---- There was never any doubt that Diego Mondragon would play the violin.

His late father, Jose de Jesus Mondragon, was an accomplished violinist in Mexico who played in groups that toured the Americas before joining the San Diego Symphony, where he performed for 23 years.

Diego, 48, a psychologist at Chaparral High School, started playing the violin at age 7 and performed his first concert at 10.

Growing up in San Ysidro, Mondragon said, he and his sisters would spend many hours practicing their music. He later had a falling out with his strict father, and ran away from home at 15.

"After that, I wanted nothing to do with the violin," said Mondragon, a Murrieta resident.

During his time away from home, Mondragon said, he experimented with drugs and got into trouble. Overcoming that aspect of his life has helped him deal with teens in his job, Mondragon said.

"I had low self-esteem and (the same) kinds of things kids go through," Mondragon said. "I dealt with a lot of these pains. I know where kids come from."

Mondragon said he doesn't regret his travails.

"I don't think I'd be as efficient in my job if I had a cushy childhood and learned everything theoretically from a book."

Mondragon utilizes his music in his job.

"I try to use music and some visualization to help kids deal with their problems and what they're dealing with," he said.

Jerry Burdick-Rutz, the band director at Great Oak High School, said Mondragon is a good role model for the students.

"He interacts with the students well," Burdick-Rutz said. "For him to combine his passion of music along with being a school psychologist is effortless. When you think of him in one regard, you don't think of him in the other one, but the two combined make total sense."

After leaving home and living with relatives in Mexico, Mondragon joined the U.S. Marine Corps, where he earned his high school and college diplomas, got married and had a son by the time he was 24 years old.

When he couldn't find a job in aviation after leaving the Marines, Mondragon returned to the violin and started working on a bachelor's degree in string pedagogy.

He also started working as an English as a second language instructor in Spring Valley.

"Because of my background, I really connected with the middle school kids," Mondragon said.

A mentor suggested he look into being a high school counselor, and Mondragon went one step further and became a school psychologist.

Mondragon said he was giving string lessons to help pay for his master's degree program when he discovered jazz violin. Now, he leads a group called Savio, which released a recording of Christmas music.

Savio comes from the words saxophone and violin.

"It's a bit cool jazz with a Latin flavor," Mondragon said of the group.

Mondragon will be joining the Chaparral orchestra and Great Oak jazz ensemble for a performance May 7 at the Old Town Temecula Theater.

"His creativity is incredible," Burdick-Rutz said. "He has classical technique combined with a jazz mind."

Burdick-Rutz said his students are excited by the opportunity to perform with a professional.

"They're just awestruck with what he's able to do," Burdick-Rutz said.

Mondragon is working on an album of original material, which includes flamenco and gypsy jazz influences.

"I'm really excited about this. It's kind of uncharted territory for a violinist," Mondragon said.

"Making a violin sound good is not easy," Burdick-Rutz said. "He makes it seem effortless."

Mondragon is a single dad to two children, Omar, 27, an Escondido police officer, and Citlati, 17, a senior at Chaparral, who sang on the Christmas recording.

Mondragon said his ultimate goal is to open a rehabilitation center in Puerto Vallarta, Mexico, where he can incorporate music and art therapy with holistic health.

For information about Savio, visit www.saviojazz.com.

Contact staff writer Craig Shultz at (951) 676-4315, Ext. 2625, or cshultz@californian.com.