Old Orchard Junior High School Band Director Julie Liebman leads her musicians through several eclectic pieces — John Williams' theme to the original "Superman" movie, an instrumental montage of some of Green Day's best-known work among them.

This is how it looks — and more importantly, sounds — a week before students perform big concerts at Old Orchard Junior High School. The rehearsal today, however, has one big difference; for every few students taking directions from conductor Liebman, there is an adult sitting beside them, playing a similar instrument and setting an example for their younger counterparts.

Professional musicians from the Chicago Philharmonic have been working with Old Orchard Junior High students for a few weeks now. Serving as mentors for the excited teenagers, they will take their place beside them at band and orchestra concerts scheduled on two nights this week.
The mentoring experience has been new to both the musicians and the students.

"This work with Old Orchard Junior High School is our pilot program, and we hope it can serve as a model in how we can serve high schools and junior high schools throughout the Chicago area," said Chicago Philharmonic Personnel and Concert Manager Terrell Pierce.

The Chicago Philharmonic bills itself as a "community of musicians," which is self-governed and sets its own agenda. The acclaimed professional group has wanted to increase its outreach in the community and give back to younger generations, it says.

"We get joy in knowing we're investing in a new generation of students, a new generation of potential artists," Pierce said. "Even if they don't become professional artists, they may play in college. They'll always have that appreciation, and they'll always remember this experience."

The unique relationship between the two parties began with the Chicago Philharmonic's "Families to the Phil" program. For the last two years, Chicago Philharmonic gave 20 free tickets to Old Orchard Junior High for each of its concerts.

"We would give them to families to go for free to enjoy this live concert music experience," Liebman said. So popular was the program, she said, that an eighth grade student even asked his parents for Philharmonic tickets for his birthday.

"What eighth grade boy wants tickets to the symphony for his birthday?" Liebman ruminated.

Expanding relationship

Chicago Philharmonic then approached Liebman about expanding the relationship — taking it to a new level with a mentorship program. Members sat down with Liebman and Old Orchard Junior High music teacher Ingrid Nevinger to shape the program.

The professional musicians sought grants, Old Orchard Junior High conducted fundraising to help make the mentorship program viable. In the end, the program gained sponsorship from the Shapiro Foundation, JW Pepper Music and Wintrust Financial.

Band and orchestra students began the relationship with small group classes with the nine Philharmonic musicians. That work led to last week's rehearsals and live concerts scheduled for this week.

"This experience has just far exceeded our expectations," Liebman said. "At first, I think the students were nervous, but then they met everyone and became comfortable."

What helped is that before the mentorship program began, the Chicago Philharmonic invited families of Old Orchard band and orchestra students to one of its concerts. There, the professional musicians introduced themselves, paving the way for the meaningful mentor
relationship that would follow.  

Old Orchard Junior High seventh grader Bryson Jordan had already loved playing the alto saxophone before Chicago Philharmonic came to town. 

That love has reached a new level. Ask about the experience of having the Chicago Philharmonic work with him and Jordan lights up with a smile of sheer joy. 

"I'm learning from someone who has been playing for literally years and years and years and years," Jordan said. "When I heard that Philharmonic was coming, I was just like 'yesss!' I've learned a lot of stuff and it's been really cool."  

Alisha Sutton, a seventh grade oboe player, said she will never forget the last two weeks. "I get to brag to other people that I've been learning from [Philharmonic musician] Ms. Anderson," Sutton said. "She's been really helpful teaching me different ways to take care of the oboe and how to get ready to play the oboe." 

Erica Anderson teaches private oboe lessons to kids from age 8 and up in addition to being a Chicago Philharmonic musician. But this experience has been different, she said. "It's been fun to work with a group of kids," she said. "And it's fun to work with kids who are not already taking private lessons because it's really kind of easy to blow their minds."

**Rehearsal time**

During rehearsal, the musicians pass down both small and big advice to the Old Orchard students who seem eager to take advantage of such a special opportunity. Students listen intently when a professional musician next to them gives a tip, seemingly absorbing it like a sponge. 

Seventh grade trumpet player Kasper Goralczyk said he plays better even after a couple weeks with Chicago Philharmonic musicians by his side. "It's been so much fun playing with them, and I've learned more than I can even say," he said.  

As this rehearsal period at Old Orchard winds down today, Liebman calls for a break before the next set of students come in. 

"This is more rehearsing than I've done in a long time," a Philharmonic musician says, smiling. But he nor anyone else is complaining. 

"This has been kind of amazing," said trombone player Adam Moen, a Chicago Philharmonic musician for about 10 years. "I'm not usually exposed to this age group."
Their excitement and exuberance is just inspiring."

For flutist Jennifer Clippert, the mentorship program has had a double special meaning since her kids are also District 68 students. She has two boys at Jane Stenson School, and next year, she will have three there.

In the future, the boys will be attending Old Orchard Junior High where Clippert has been mentoring students for the last couple weeks.

"They’re a little jealous," she admitted. "They want to come with me."

One day, they very well could. This is a relationship that both Chicago Philharmonic and Old Orchard Junior High officials say they want to see continue on. Together, the two generations believe they have managed to hit all the right notes.

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