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POUNDING HOME DIVERSITY'S IMPORTANCE: Japanese drumming group performs for Hingham students

By JOE McGEE
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HINGHAM – Middle school students got a lesson in percussion and Japanese culture yesterday. Three members of Odaiko New England (ONE), a Brookline-based kumi taiko, or Japanese ensemble drumming corps, gave a 40-minute performance to hundreds of sixth-, seventh- and eighth-grade students as part of an enrichment program made possible by Young Audiences of Massachusetts, the Hingham Cultural Council and the middle school PTO.

The rhythms of the traditional Japanese drumming were mesmerizing.

“I’ve never seen anything like that before,” said Toby Walters, 14. “The whole place was energized.”

ONE members Mark Rooney, Juni Kobayashi and group founder Elaine Fong gave yesterday’s pulsating performance.

Although ONE plays at corporate diversity training workshops, festivals and other events throughout the year, Rooney said introducing students to the ancient art of kumi taiko is a big part of corps’ mission.

“You can teach a kid about Japanese culture, but a better way of learning is to actually see it,” he said. “We want to spread cultural awareness.”

Sixth-grader Michelle Chin was one of four lucky students who were invited to bang the drums along with the ensemble. She said she had never seen anything like kumi taiko before.

The intense drumming combines dramatic movements and vocalization. It can seem a bit intimidating, especially up close.

“I was a little nervous, but it was a lot of fun,” Michelle said.

ONE takes prides in its diversity. The 13 members come from different professions and ethnic backgrounds.



Sixth-grader Eric Chau drums with Juni Kobayashi as Odaiko New England presents a show for hundreds of Hingham Middle School students.
(LISA BUL/The Patriot Ledger)

The ensemble includes a web engineer, a lawyer, a project manager and a professional dancer.

Some of the drummers are of Japanese descent, some are partly Asian and others are European Americans. All have a passion for the strenuous drumming style.

Strength training is a must to prepare someone for the rigors of kumi taiko drumming.

PTO member Barbara Emmel was on hand to watch the show yesterday. She said she wants her 11-year-old daughter, Amanda, to be exposed to different cultures.

“We want them to know that they’re part of a world bigger than just Hingham,” Emmel said. “Unless they’re taking part in martial arts or involved in some other art form like dancing or music, or if they go into Boston once in a while, they don’t get exposed to things like this other than in social studies class.”

Emmel said performance art can be especially good for children who do not get as much from reading and lectures as some of their classmates do.

“I’m a visual learner, myself,” she said.

The middle school PTO also has sponsored Latin music and Southern dancing performances as a way of providing cultural awareness to the students.

“It’s good exposure to the outside world,” said Kathy Peters, whose son Nolan Connors is in the eighth grade. “I’m sure not a lot of kids get out to see things like this.”

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