

A “Children’s Day at the Organ” Leads to Discover the Basics®
by Suzanne Anderson, Houston, Texas

I held a “Children’s Day at the Organ” last year in August and had no idea what to expect, as only two children signed up for it. The entire music staff said it could not be done, and there would be no interest. The day came and I almost fell over backwards. Twenty-seven grade-schoolers showed up! My AGO colleague, David Hilburt, graciously play while I walked, rapped, and explained or did some of the introductory songs. And they had a blast! The highlights were t-shirts I had begged off a local music store with an assortment of instruments on them, and blowing up balloons and letting them exhale through a demonstrator reed pipe. I had games in the fellowship hall while I took one class at a time to discover the sounds and MIDI system. There were prizes for every game, and even cookies shaped like eighth notes. The very next day, a fourth grader, age 9, almost 10, Ryan Edson came and asked me if I was teaching piano. That very week, Wayne Leupold had called me and asked if I was going to be a test teacher, since I had asked him about it at the national AGO convention that summer. The next Sunday, I told Ryan’s mother to think about organ lessons and to bring him upstairs if he was interested. Right after the Sunday School hour here they came. He had told me his mother wanted him to have lessons, and he told her I wanted him! He’d worked the whole thing out himself.

The first day I told him not to lie to me if he didn’t practice, that there were plenty of other things we could do. I said never take a short cut, because it makes you sloppy in the end, whether you can hear a difference or not. He signs up on the practice schedule just like every one else and has his mom call to reschedule if a funeral or something we had not expected happens. He loves practicing more than anything and goes by all the rules. He loves the boundaries and the results he gets. When other kids go to “play” at the organ, he goes to moderate and make sure no one spills cookies, or scratches it.

One of the major forces in Ryan’s success is that his mother attends almost every lesson, quiet as a mouse. She does not interfere with our time, but can remember things at practice time that he might not be sure of. Now that his grandparents have moved to town, he gets a great deal of support when he plays for church.

Discover the Basics® is a growth oriented series. The first day, I thought how is he going to do this! Well, Ryan had a fresh, excited mind, and a little “nemesis” at school who was taking piano. He learned quickly that his technique was not the same as piano. The next Sunday, his mother reported that he was watching the hymnbook religiously through the service. The PedXTends® worked exactly as planned, with him reaching the pedals alone by the end of *Book D*.

Skills arrived just when Ryan could do them. I am pleased to see a little bit of form introduced. Ryan can play easily a piece filled with triplets and duplets mixed. He loves the tutti, the cornet, and Away in a Manger on a 2' Flute with tremolo. His favorite is the Flûte Harmonique. Ryan knows the whole color palette, does well on intervals, hears major, minor and open fifth chords well.

When I started the *Discover the Basics®* series, I decided to not taint my experience by adding other works and exercises. It has turned out to be unnecessary. I do add “trivia” and occasionally assign him to go to the ’Net to learn more about a composer, who wrote organ music, that is introduced in the B, C, or D books. Ryan has a natural relaxed hand, is never nervous, likes all the songs in the books, and is always ready for the next item. He also enjoys the writing portions. The only times we have had to slow down was because of our respective vacations, and his grandfather’s bout in the hospital. Ryan asked for summer lessons when school was out, and tried to do more than a unit per week. He was hard to contain!

Discover the Basics® is well thought out and accommodates a child’s growth, attention patterns, and traditional stumbling blocks. The variety of composers, styles, and registrations has kept Ryan enthused. He has played for church in controlled conditions and even handled the negotiation of

playing a carol medley prelude with several registrations, and then getting downstairs up front quietly for the Children's Choir's first song!

With all this progress, you'd think he is locked in a closet somewhere. He played softball and football. (But he is now through with football. In case you don't know, that's pretty gutsy in Texas!) He also gave up the swim team because "something had to go".

I have gone back to school and had my teacher hear Ryan. He suggested that he stay here and study organ here. Out of his mouth pops: "No sir, I want to go to (Texas) A&M to study Forensic Entomology." My teacher, dumbstruck, said I had 8 years to straighten him out!

Ryan was pretty pleased to be a "graduating guinea pig" upon finishing the *Discover the Basics*[®] series in a year. He said one day, out of the blue, "You know, we need more organists. We're special." Whether or not he majors in organ, I believe the organ has its tentacles in him. He'll never get it out of his blood now. Maybe he'll return to it or do it alongside another career, or attend concerts, or donate to musical events/societies. He is now a part of the society of musicians. And I do hope that he changes his mind in eight years.