

THE CUSTOMER WHISPERER | BY GREG BILLINGS

# Raised by Beatniks

Most people are surprised when I tell them I was raised by beatniks. Well, maybe not real New York or San Francisco beatniks but the best provincial version you could have in 1960s Milwaukee. We lived in the postwar suburbs (think AMC's "Mad Men"), but my parents aspired to the East Coast hipster scene in the same way our generation embraced Haight-Ashbury and Woodstock a decade later.

They wore black turtleneck sweaters, and for a short time, Dad had a

beard. Their friends moonlighted as artists, musicians, writers and actors. We had a set of bongo drums in the basement rec room. By the time my sister and I were born, our parents had changed their names from Gary and Dolores to the much cooler Zeb and Dodo. They were the Real Bohemians of the Milwaukee Shore. (Ironically, we really were Bohemian — my grandmother's sisters were born outside Prague.)

The art on our walls was painted by their friends or by my grandmother. It wasn't museum-quality, but it was real and clearly different from the sofa-matching seascapes J.C. Penney sold to our neighbors. When "The Music Man" came to Chicago, our parents drove us 100 miles to see it, even though we were just 11 and 12 years old.

Mom was the blond ingénue of the local community theater. Many evenings, while the kids watched Lucy and Ricky, she and her friends sat around the kitchen table, reading scripts and consuming copious amounts of black coffee. Dad practiced his saxophone and wrote four-part vocal arrangements he and his buddies would sing in the basement. He always had his sax in the car trunk in case he had a chance to sit in with the pianist at a restaurant. It was only years later I finally understood why my schoolmates' working class parents thought we were weird.

This unconventional upbringing had its share of problems. But it also had unanticipated yet wonderful consequences. My weirdo parents raised four kids with an appreciation of art, theater, literature and music. They raised kids who read books and played instruments. They raised kids who could appreciate a community theater production as much as a Broadway show and a local jazz combo as much as a major rock concert.

Because we saw people actually creating things, as opposed to just consum-

ing them, we assumed we could accomplish anything if we worked hard enough. We became adults who write, paint and play music. Adults who watch a good movie rather than cable news or a reality TV show. Adults for whom art isn't just real but really important and for whom artistic expression isn't only rewarding but essential.

## LASTING IMPRESSIONS

When our president encouraged parents to turn off the TV and read with their kids, he implied something important. Kids are lousy at doing what we tell them to do, but they're really good at copying our behavior. This is precisely what we see in music students from homes where the parents play instruments. And this is the essence of the message we need to communicate to other parents.

When a soccer mom says she wants her 2- or 3-year-old to play the piano, we should seize the opportunity and tell Mom that it's not enough to simply enroll her child in Kindermusik or Suzuki. The kid needs to see her playing the piano (or guitar or flute or zither) — and she needs to start playing today. Anyone who has ever tried to practice with a toddler in the room knows kids are fascinated by live sound and can't get enough of it. Playing the piano with a 4-year-old hanging on your left arm may be inconvenient, but it's a defining



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experience. That little girl will be begging for lessons when she's 6.

Parental involvement is more than just paying for lessons, attending recitals or being a band booster. Parents who play spawn kids who play, and parents who play music with their kids bond in ways that are profound and permanent. These kids also become active in theater, band, graphic arts, dance and debate. They are hard-working, good kids. They look you in the eye when they say "hello," and as adults, they will have enough poise to stand in front of an audience without

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fear. They're usually excellent students and rarely get into trouble.

NAMM has driven home the message that music makes you smarter. As retailers and music advocates, we must take the next step and let parents know that the single most important thing they can do to encourage their kids is to let their kids see them playing and enjoying music.

These days, I'm spending as much time as I can with my grandson Dylan. And some of that time is spent with him on my lap at the piano. He really likes it. Just wait and see. It's gonna make a difference in his life. **MI**

Greg Billings whispers to customers at the Steinway Piano Gallery in Bonita Springs, Fla. He welcomes questions and comments at [greg@steinwaynaples.com](mailto:greg@steinwaynaples.com).



Top left, from left: Steinway Piano Society's Greg and Sara Billings with restaurateur Phillip Boet; performers in the Physicians Talent Show

STEINWAY PIANO GALLERY | OUTREACH

# MUSIC & MEDICINE

## Nineteen doctors make music for local charities

A record 19 physicians recently took the stage at the Sugden Community Theatre in Naples, Fla., for the 6th Annual Physicians Talent Show. The charity event was hosted by the Steinway Piano Society, the nonprofit branch of Greg Billings' Steinway Piano Gallery of Bonita Springs, Fla.

"Everyone had a great time, and we raised almost \$40,000 for the Neighborhood Health Clinic and the Steinway Piano Society's Piano Bank," said Sara Billings,

the event chair and a registered nurse. "Having outgrown Sugden, next year we are taking the show to the Naples Philharmonic Center for the Arts. Our little show has become a part of the social fabric of our local medical community."

The Neighborhood Health Clinic gives medical care to low-income Collier County adults, and the Steinway Piano Society's Piano Bank gives pianos and music lessons to economically disadvantaged children.