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Jazz students jam with visiting pros

by Roxana Orellana

With feet tapping and heads bobbing, jazz band students at Bryant Middle School were feeling the rhythm.

"It was awesome. I don't think we've ever sounded better," said tenor saxophonist Zoe Diener about a recording of herself and her classmates made following a lesson with a professional jazz musician. "It's so inspirational. It makes me want to stick with it."

Jazz band and choir students at Bryant, 40 S. 800 East, spent a morning making music with a visiting group of high school jazz musicians and two professionals as part of the "Peer to Peer" jazz education initiative tour. The program was created by the Los Angeles-based Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz as a component of its Jazz in America outreach.

The weeklong event paired students at Bryant Middle School and Highland, East and West high schools with six jazz students from Chicago, Grammy-nominated sax player Antonio Hart, and vocalist Lisa Henry. The purpose was to learn about the importance of jazz in American history and gain performance experience.

"It's interesting. I've never learned anything like this," said Bryant eighth-grader Sammy Washington of the skat lessons she and her peers got from the visitors.

Heili Howell, who started playing the drums in band this year, said listening to talented students who are just a few years older makes her want to practice more.

"I'd like to get into a group like that, something that has to do with music," Howell said.

Each of the school visits include a concert for students, a jazz vocal workshop and a workshop for the school's jazz band with the Chicago students playing along.

Erick Mateo, a senior tenor saxophonist at Chicago's Gallery 37 Center for the Arts, said it's great to play with other students because they relate to the same problems they ran into when they were learning how to play music. Bryant jazz band instructor Cip Petersen loved hearing his students perform and show off their talents.

"It's absolutely wonderful to have the opportunity to hobnob with professional jazz players. They were pretty excited about it," Petersen said of his students.

"They sounded great and they learned a few things."