

Jackson Browne Gives Back

Transforming Schools Through the Arts

by **Michael Chatfield**

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The excitement was palpable as the shiny red SUV rumbled into the parking lot of Martin Luther King, Jr. Elementary School in Seaside. And with good reason. It's not every day that a rock star shows up at an elementary school.

As he stepped from the car, Jackson Browne was visibly delighted to be greeted by three enthusiastic children carrying hand-painted welcome banners. With him was Kathy Fletcher, national director of Turn-around Arts, a John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts program that strives to transform school's culture and climate through exposure to various forms of art.

Browne is a designated "Turnaround Art-ist," along with many other high-profile artists in a wide range of disciplines such as fellow musicians Elton John, Herbie Hancock and Esperanza Spalding; actresses Cameron Diaz and Jane Fonda; performance painter David Garibaldi; and architect Frank Gehry. Each artist is assigned a participating school.

"Turnaround Arts is a national program that brings arts education to high-poverty elementary and middle schools around the country," says National Director Kathy Fletcher. "We bring in arts supplies and musical instruments and train teachers on how to integrate the arts into other subjects, like reading and math."

Browne is excited to be a part of that paradigm. "It's really well known that learning music actually aids in brain development," he says. "By learning to make music, especially in a band, you can learn math easier. Most of all I think that it helps with organizational perception. Like if you're in an orchestra, you're a small part but what you do is important to the whole. I think that gives young minds a sense of place, a sense of their role in life and in their community."

The 2016/2017 school year marks the first that the Turnaround Arts program is a part of the curriculum at King Elementary.

"This is giving us an opportunity to create a new identity for the school," says Principal Robert Greenlee. "That's one of the powerful things that Turnaround will bring to King. It's going to be known as the arts magnet school. We want people to want to transfer here because of our arts programs."

Inducted into both the Rock and Roll and Songwriter's Hall of Fame, Browne has been a steady presence on the musical landscape since his breakthrough hit "Doctor My Eyes," was released in 1972. He has written many hits, performed by himself ("Running on Empty," "The Pretender") and other artists, including the Eagles, Linda Ronstadt, The Byrds, Nico and the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band. He is also well known as an activist and advocate for environmental and human rights causes and has devoted time and talent to many causes. Turnaround: Arts is just the latest example of his drive to give back to the greater community.

It's probable that even the parents of the children Browne visited weren't born when "Doctor My Eyes" was dominating the airwaves, but that didn't dampen the kids' enthusiasm. The songwriter visited three classrooms, taking part in an art class, a language-arts class and a music program called Palenke Arts. He was obviously charmed and moved by his visit.

"I didn't realize all these things were going on here," Browne says. "As always, those with the least are doing the most. Why is that?"

Following his classroom experiences, Browne took part in a school-wide assembly where he was serenaded by students (a Palenke Arts chorus sang "Walls and Doors," a song from his 2014 album "Standing in the Breech," written in Spanish by Cuban singer songwriter Carlos Verela and translated by Browne) before taking the stage for a solo performance of "Take it Easy," the Eagles' mega-hit cowritten with Glen Frey. Even school children know that song.

"When you look at kids listen to music you see that every one of them understands it without having to be taught," he says. "Music is alive in them."

Between writing, touring and recording, Jackson Browne is a very busy man. But he is also deeply committed to making the world a better place through music and the arts.

"I know what's needed is a lot more than one visit," he says. "I really respect Turnaround: Arts for the outreach they're making into the communities by bringing artists and school leaders together. They're advocated for better funding and awareness of the arts."

And that's a very good thing.

To learn more about the Turnaround Arts program, visit www.turnaroundartsca.org; and Browne at www.jacksonbrowne.com.

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