

This interview was on 1/15/2025. The interviewee, Ann Marie Novak (AMN), is a piano teacher and the director of Suzuki Programs. The interviewer is Cheyenne Antell (CA) from the Portage County Historical Society. This audio was recorded inside of Ann-Marie's office inside the UW - Stevens Point Noel Fine Arts Center building. The entire interview is 18 minutes, 26 seconds.

CA (00:01): My name is Cheyenne Antell. It is January 15th, 2025, and I'm here with Ann Marie Novak, the Director of Suzuki Programs. Could you introduce yourself and share how you came to the position that you're in?

AMN (00:17): I'm Ann Marie Novak, and I am, yes, I'm Director of Suzuki Programs, but I'm also a piano teacher here and have been for 33 years. How I came to be here? Well, can I go from the beginning?

CA (00:38): Yes, we've got all the time.

AMN (00:40): So I grew up in Western Pennsylvania and in a farming community, much like Portage County, and there was no music around. There was no classical music around, except that I was put into piano lessons by default because my first grade teacher said I needed something to keep me out of trouble. And so she suggested I do some music or some dance or gymnastics. Dance and gymnastics were both full, so I ended up by default in piano. And my interest grew as I got into the band and the orchestra, and I was very fortunate to then attend Oberlin College and Conservatory, which is actually where I began my Suzuki training. That's where my first connection with Suzuki was. I then went to UMass for graduate school, and I started a music school there. So I was director in Massachusetts for five years, but I wanted to refocus on my playing and my teaching. So I wanted out of administration, and the job came open here in Stevens Point. And just because it was Stevens Point, at that time known as the American Suzuki Talent Education Center, and just because of the reputation, I had to come and interview. And when I came here, the thing that struck me most was the people, meeting the people and feeling like I was already at home. So I had a thriving studio in Massachusetts, but I opted to come here just because of all the wonderful perks. So that's how I ended up here.

CA (02:30): That's quite a move, too. Did you have, I mean, you brought your family and pets and everything here. Did you get any students from that Massachusetts area that eventually made it here as well?

AMN (02:42): There were a couple that came to the Summer Institute.

CA (02:46): Nice. So how, when you came here, I'm assuming you didn't move in as the director, what job position did you start with?

AMN (02:57): I started as a piano teacher and as the collaborative pianist who accompanied the students and also then, also collaborated with the other faculty in performances.

CA (03:08): How did you end up going from that piano teacher position up to directorship?

AMN (03:15): Out of necessity. We had a rather quick turnover of the director position, and I was the one who had the experience. And I stepped in to just do the most I could with the program.

CA (03:32): How long have you been the director now?

AMN (03:35): Eight years.

CA (03:36): Very nice. So once you came here and you started working in the area, have you been involved in any other music programs or music groups here in Portage County?

AMN (03:48): Well, the center keeps me quite busy. I am an active member of the Wisconsin Music Teachers Association, and I was the chair of the district auditions for years. I'm a member of the Suzuki Association of the Americas, which is the national organization. I help with and have played for solo and ensemble for kids from the schools and from our program who participate in that.

CA (04:22): So I've heard a couple different names used for Suzuki or Aber Suzuki. What were the changes of the names and what do you prefer to be used for this program now?

AMN (04:36): Well, we used to be the American Suzuki Talent Education Center, which was a mouthful. And of course, Miss Aber started the program. And after she passed and we moved to this building, we voted as a faculty what to rename the program. And so it was named after Miss Aber. So it's the Aber Suzuki Center. We are often referred to that way in print, but we are also referred to with the acronym ASC. So that's probably the most common. On campus, we're just simply known as Suzuki. We also have the branch American Suzuki Institute, which is the summer camp. So we have a little confusion between the acronyms.

CA (05:24): Sure. So when you've been since you've been involved in this program, how would you describe it?

AMN (05:36): I would say, well, there are two answers to that. One is personal and one is more professional, I guess. I guess the professional side musically, I think the best description is comprehensive. So we have programs from birth to age four. That's where we start. That's not instrumental, but that is parental and child oriented classes where the parent bonds with the child around music. The parent becomes more confident in singing with the child. A lot of parents now don't do that. Historically, we grew up, you know, the grandparent was still in the house. And so that music was passed down generation to generation. And as we have all separated as a society, we don't have that as much. And so the confidence of what songs to sing with the child and how to just how to be part of music isn't quite there. So the parents get that opportunity to effectively bond around music. Then at age four, kids generally, that's the time when they would start lessons in an instrument or voice. And we have all the string instruments plus piano, plus harp, plus voice. And we offer group classes and private lessons. We have an orchestra. We have many different aspects of the musical experience covered. We offer recitals monthly in our beautiful recital hall here, Michelsen Recital Hall. Students get to play with the best sound on the best piano. So it's a very, very vibrant program. The personal side of that, I feel that the essence of ASC is wrapped up in the word family. I think the parents, the students, the faculty, everybody is one family. We're made up of many families, but we are one family. Matter of fact, my letters that I send to the larger group, including all of the families, I always, the salutation is always, dear Suzuki family.

CA (08:14): Speaking of that family, do you have any memories of working with these families or memories of your time here as a teacher and as a director that you would want to share?

AMN (00:00): There are so many memories after 33 years. It's hard to pick any specific ones, but there are ongoing moments that create memories. And I think every time that a child has an aha moment, that's very special to me. As director, since I've been in director position, I'm still teaching, but the things that we've done with the program, I think one of the most fun things we did was to start our practice-athon where we set 10 days of the month of March into April, and we asked the kids to practice as many minutes as they can. We keep track of all the minutes for everybody in the entire program, and we set a goal. And last year, I think it was 62,000 minutes total from all the students. It's also a fundraiser, so we set a funding goal, too, and the students

get grandparents and neighbors to sponsor them. So that's been fun, not only because it supports the program, but it increases the sense of community, which I think is so very important.

CA (09:42): Did you beat the goal last year?

AMN (09:44): Yes, we've made our goal every year for the last eight years.

CA (09:48): That's pretty good.

AMN (09:49): Yes.

CA (09:50): So what is the future of Suzuki?

AMN (09:58): Well, I would say that while the past, the history of the center and the Institute, that history rests on the shoulders of amazingly strong leaders and visionaries such as Margery Aber. I believe the future really lies in the community itself. Community engagement and support is what makes the center possible. It's also what allows the center to give back. So it's a very symbiotic relationship. I really think the life force of the center especially is the community. I am hoping that we can reach deeper into underserved populations in the community. That's something I feel strongly about. I have some possibilities kind of on the drawing board. I can't divulge them just yet, but I'm hoping to piggyback with some other organizations in the area. I think the most important future we have though is really the privilege to carry forward the philosophy of Dr. Suzuki, which is that every child can if they're given the opportunity and I think also to carry forward Margery Aber's legacy.

CA (11:23): What could the community of Portage County or even outside of the county, knowing how many students come from a distance to attend these programs, what can they do to support you?

AMN (11:36): Well, of course, as any arts organization, we always need financial support. So the generosity of the community is important. But I think the most important thing is to let other people know we're here. If you know about us, share it with other people. We do try to have events where not only do we go out and play, but we also do hands-on events. And attending those gives anybody an experience. You've never touched a harp. Frankly, I've never touched a harp. But you can try any of our instruments with a guided, you know, as a guided opportunity to try them. And so those kinds of things, letting people know that we're here, we're doing these things, come to our concerts, share our Facebook posts, just let people know that we're here and we're doing wonderful things with kids.

CA (12:32): Do you have any advice that you would give to parents who want to start their students or their kids on a musical journey, but they don't know where to start?

AMN (12:40): Come to the Aber Suzuki Center. Start young. Don't be afraid. If you have no musical experience, that does not prevent you from having one with your child. We have the parents work with the children. They come to the lessons. They practice with them. A lot of parents feel like that's not for me. I never did that. I don't have any experience. You don't have to. The teachers here are amazing and they know how to teach not only the kids, but they also know how to teach the parents to work with the children. And we also help teach the parents to play a little bit so they feel confident.

CA (13:27): Is there any advice you would give, on the other hand, to those students or those children that are attending your programs?

AMN (13:35): Keep practicing. Never give up. It can be difficult sometimes. It can be frustrating when you're practicing. So having perseverance is one of the most important qualities you learn from studying music. And you can only do that if you have people supporting you to keep you going through the hard times. When you hear a fine player play in a concert, they make it look easy. And that's the goal. As a performer, I want to make it look and sound easy. But it's hard work. But we shouldn't be afraid of hard work because that's what gets us great things.

CA (14:21): Yeah. Does the Aper Suzuki program or the center work with any other programs in the community or are you a standalone?

AMN (14:31): We actually are not tied structurally. We're not really tied structurally to the university. We are independent financially. We have this beautiful space and we contribute to the ongoing activities. But we are, in fact, standalone. We do work with the Chain Exploration Center in Waupaca. We offer an in-school, during the school day, program. We are basically their music program. So we have a string program. Everybody plays a stringed instrument from grades three through six. And our teachers go there. And so we connect with that program.

CA (15:26): Are there any other music programs that if you have students attending here that you recommend they also go and do this or also participate in that?

AMN (15:36): Oh, I think participating in your school orchestra is incredibly important, or band, depending on what instrument you play. I think that's really important. I think that the musical theater groups in this area are wonderful for kids. So there are many opportunities and there are many fine teachers in the town who are not affiliated with us. So finding a good teacher is probably the most important thing. And there are very good teachers around. The advantage we offer is our comprehensive nature.

CA (16:16): Is there anything else that you could share about the program or the center or anything else that you would want to just add to this interview for us?

AMN (16:27): I think we can't really talk about the Suzuki programs without mentioning the American Suzuki Institute in the summer. We bring between six hundred and a thousand people into town for the two week period. And it's a very motivating and inspiring event for everyone. We bring teachers in from all over the country, students from six to eight countries. And it's a very active time. And I think it brings something to Portage County, to the area. I think it enriches the area. Our concerts are all free and open to the public during the Institute. And I think many people don't realize that. So it would be good for people to be aware. It's funny when you as a musician, if you go to a national music conference somewhere and you're talking to somebody and they say, where are you from? And you say, Stevens Point, they go, oh, Suzuki. So Suzuki is known not just here, but it's known internationally. It's recognized by musicians very quickly.

CA (17:45): And I think part of that is how many students you've had come from countries and states that are out of here. And then they take all those skills back home when they leave.

AMN (17:55): Right. We've probably put one hundred and twenty thousand students through the Institute and Center over these fifty seven. It'll be fifty seven years now.

CA (18:08): Wow. That is such an accomplishment.

AMN (18:10): It is. It is. Well, it's a legacy of many, many people having worked together.

CA (18:16): Yeah. Is there anything else you would like to share with us?

AMN (18:22): No, I think that's it.

CA (18:24): Thank you for your time.

AMN (18:25): Absolutely.