

## High School for Recording Arts: A space for musically gifted students

Written by Abeni Hill

Wednesday, 29 January 2014 16:30

---



High School for Recording Arts (HSRA), 1166 University Ave. St. Paul, is no ordinary charter school. The school was founded to create a safe and positive space for musically gifted students whose learning styles didn't fit the status quo.

"When students haven't been successful in more traditional spaces they don't feel comfortable, they don't feel understood," said Executive Director Tony Simmons. "They feel their style of learning and the way they carry themselves, the way they think and apply their thinking towards learning isn't appreciated or understood in a traditional space.

"We need to create a space that allows our students to be themselves," said Simmons. The director said many students are either drop outs or have been expelled from school and as a result, they arrive at HSRA older than the average high school student with very few credits. Simmons said the average age of the student body is about 17 ½.

"We spend time getting to know our students really well," said Simmons. He said it is important to identify the students' strengths.

"We know a lot of our students are incredibly creative," said Simmons. "There are so many opportunities that you can take advantage of by building upon that asset that will connect to core learning areas such as English, Math, and Science.

"It's all about creating a different impression on that young person," said Simmons. "For the first time in their life, they might feel appreciated."

HSRA founder David T.C. Ellis developed the idea for the school at his recording studio, Studio 4. Ellis noticed a need for acknowledgement of youth in the community.

"Right around that time, at the studio, he noticed a bunch of kids hanging out wanting to know about the music industry," said Simmons. The teenagers were skipping school. "He finally had the revelation of 'I can't get these kids to go to school, I need a school here.'"

"I saw the need in the community," said Ellis. "These young people are really motivated to educate themselves through the process of recording arts."

Ellis said they were eager to show him their musical chops. "They were all congregating at the studio and wanted me to let them in the studio and show me what they could do," said Ellis. The studio owner couldn't engage with them as much as they had hoped.

"Initially I was blowing them off, I was busy trying to get clients," said Ellis. He changed his mind when one day when one of his clients did not show up for an appointment. The music industry

## High School for Recording Arts: A space for musically gifted students

Written by Abeni Hill

Wednesday, 29 January 2014 16:30

---

enthusiasts convinced him to let them in the studio.

"They just blew me away with their ability and what they were capable of doing," said Ellis.

Ellis felt a connection to these teenagers who were curious about the music business. "I had a lineage of these young people because I went through the same type of situation," said Ellis. The high school founder defines himself as a nontraditional student.

"I got kicked out of some of the more traditional schools," said Ellis. He enrolled in St. Paul Open School and it changed his life.

"It was a lifesaver for me," said Ellis. "The school approached education from a different perspective in that it was hands-on. They really nurtured and enhanced me with that."

The HSRA approach to education is collaborative learning. The atmosphere of the school is spacious. While there are separate classrooms, they all face a cafeteria-like area that has a stage. The classrooms are situated to create an oval shape toward the stage.

Simmons said at times they will open up the classrooms and let the students interact with each other although they were initially studying separate subjects.

"Creativity flows best in that type of environment," said Simmons. "It allows us to do the things we need to do, whatever that student is bringing as an asset to the other things we know they need to demonstrate in terms of learning."

"The fact that teachers are working together, they're not closed off from each other, students are working together amongst different advisories," said Simmons. "It is a natural environment to learn."

Simmons said the High School for Recording Arts doesn't just prepare students for the workforce. "Our main goal is when it is time for these students to graduate, they are looking at themselves as life-long learners," said Simmons.

For more information about HSRA, visit <http://www.hsra.org/> To see HSRA student's projects, visit the YouTube page at <http://www.youtube.com/user/HSRAMinnesota>