



Dr. Alice King Hammel

Those Who Can, Teach

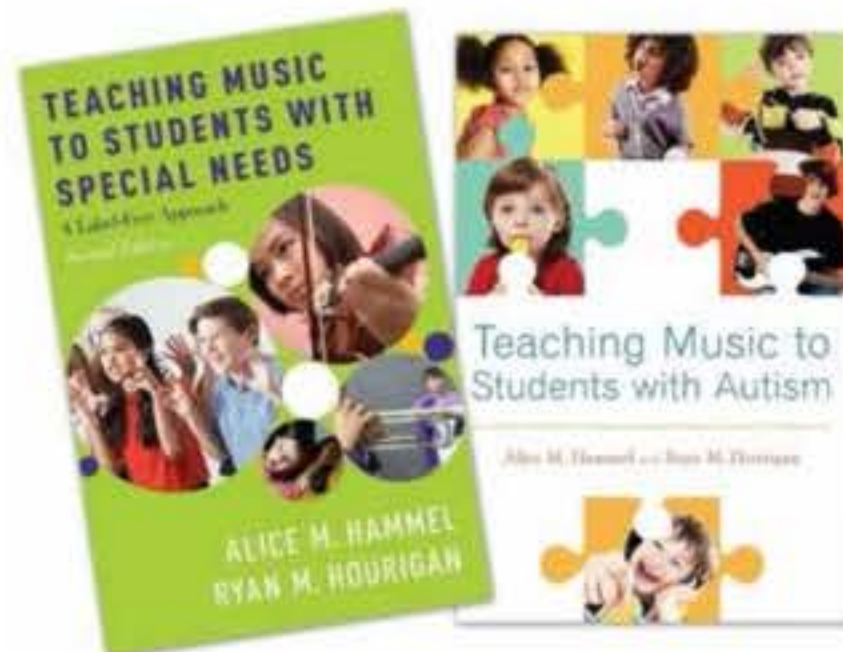
**Dr. Alice King Hammel
creates bright futures
for others.**

By Ladonna Paedae Rodriguez
and Christy Swift
Photos Courtesy Alice Hammel



April is Autism Awareness Month, and one of the pioneers of music education for children with autism is Dr. Alice King Hammel, renowned music educator, author, clinician, and former Sebring resident.

Dr. Hammel is a faculty member at James Madison University, the current President of the Virginia Music Educators Association, and Past-President of the Council for Exceptional Children - Division for Visual and Performing Arts Education. She has spoken at national conferences, co-authored four books, and has received numerous awards, including a special "Inclusion in Music Education" award named in her honor by James Madison University, as well as the prestigious 2018 Outstanding Music Educator Award from the Virginia Music Educators Association, and the 2023 Lowell Mason Fellow Award through the National Association for Music Education. ▶



Alice moved from Kirksville, Missouri to Sebring, Florida in 1974, along with her brother, Nelson, and parents, pediatricians Drs. Nelson and Alice King. Her parents were the only providers accepting Medicaid at the time, and Alice spent a lot of time at their clinic. "I would see kids at their office who were not at the schools that I went to," Dr. Hammel said. "Some of those children had disabilities that, in those days, kept them out of public school." She found that curious.

In the 7th grade, young Alice played flute under the guidance of band director, Mr. Fulton. "We were playing a scale, and that is when I thought 'I want to be a middle school band director,'" Dr. Hammel remembered. She "did everything that Sebring High School offered": band, choir and drama. The pieces of the puzzle were coming together.

"I wanted to teach musical skills to kids with disabilities, those who are neurodivergent—people whose brains are functionally different—such as those with Autism, ADHD and anxiety," Dr. Hammel said. "I had the love of teaching. I graduated from Shenandoah University, and then attended Florida State University, which was one of the first universities to break through the fine line of 'music education' and 'special education.' I took music therapy classes as well as musical education, earning my Master's degree from FSU. My Doctorate was earned at Shenandoah University."

When she first began her studies, special needs education was still in its infancy. During an interview for the "Enhance Life with Music" podcast, Dr. Hammel talked about her undergraduate studies and how excited she was to finally get to the section in the syllabus on teaching students with disabilities. "The professor said, 'You are going to have students with disabilities in your classroom, and you're going to have to do things to help them learn.' And then she turned the page."

Since then, Dr. Hammel has made it her life's calling to make music education for neurodivergent kids easier and better for both students and educators. She has co-authored four books, including "Teaching Music to Students with Special Needs: A Label-Free Approach" which she wrote with Ryan M. Hourigan (both Dr. Hammel and Ryan are parents of autistic children). ▶



Ian & Hannah Maser, Alice, Bruce and Hollie



Hannah Hammel Maser



Bruce Hammel



Hollie Hammel

“We pushed this new heuristic where we think of students in domains: communication, sensory, cognition, behavior, emotion, and physical, instead of separating them into discrete disabilities the way we tend to—what I think—is hyper-label in our society,” Dr. Hammel explained. Her books are all practitioner-oriented, with strategies on using music to help kids with learning differences thrive. Some are adaptive (they can be used with the entire class) and some are modifications (for a specific child). The goal is for every child in the classroom to learn something.

“There’s a lot of give and take that we weren’t necessarily taught as teacher-musicians,” Alice explained. “Each lesson becomes a totally different thing.”

The rest of the Hammel family are all musically talented as well. Alice’s husband, Dr. Bruce Hammel, is a professor of music theory and bassoon at Virginia Commonwealth University. He holds a Doctor of Music in bassoon and a Master of Music in wind instruments. Their two daughters, Hannah and Hollie, are gifted and accomplished artists as well. Hannah is the Principal flutist with the Detroit Symphony Orchestra, while Hollie’s career is in Nashville. She has sung with country singer Sara Evans, R & B singer Joss Stone, has performed at the Country Music Awards as a back-up singer for Carrie Underwood, and was featured in Disney’s 50th anniversary celebration, singing “Harmonious.”

On the rare occasion that she is home, instead of out of town lecturing at educational conventions, Dr. Hammel enjoys teaching the students majoring in Music Education at many schools through residencies. Said Dr. Hammel, “We are getting more students who are on the autism spectrum. They are amazing. They will just tell you about how they learn. When you send more neurodivergent teachers into the field, you better understand how to teach all students.”

Dr. Hammel is a force to be reckoned with, a small but mighty package when it comes to teaching and sharing her knowledge. Her passion is in educating the next generation of teachers who will bring music education to those with learning differences. The beneficiaries of her passion will undoubtedly be those who learn, gain confidence, and realize that although they “learn differently,” they too can go on to achieve great things. ♡



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