

# THE BLUES MAN

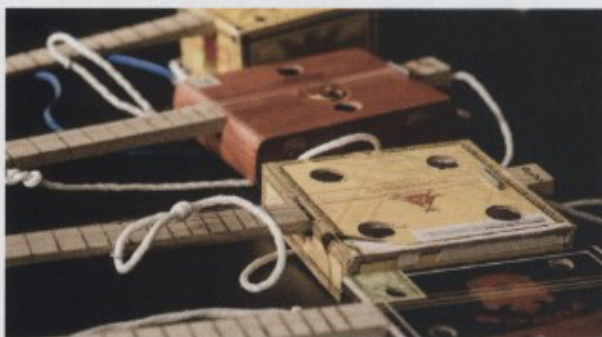
Local artist and blues musician Curtis Blues teaches students the connection between math and music. —ROBYN SMITH

**M**ATH IS HARD. Engineering is even harder. But the seventh-grade students of George Washington Middle School's Inventions and Innovations class get a fun introduction to these complex concepts by building cigar box guitars.

It takes six to seven weeks of some woodshop magic, hot glue and creativity, but by the time they've finished, the guitar doesn't stand out from any other school project. The projects come to life when the students learn to play them. That's where Curtis Blues comes in.

"The guitars you built, they're not busywork that your teacher gave you to teach you math, although I'm sure you did learn a lot of math," Blues says to the students on a spring Tuesday in preparation for a school assembly that Friday. "You actually built a piece of musical history that is a real instrument, and I'm going to show you how to play it. This is one of the coolest things you've ever made."

Curtis "Blues" Mailloux is a certified arts integration performer with the Arts Council of Fairfax County, a Wolf Trap teaching artist and often works with the national organization Young Audiences in multiple states. On weekends, Mailloux can be found performing outside the Torpedo Factory in Old Town Alexandria or at one of the nearby music venues. He was also voted Blues



CONSTRUCTING CIGAR BOX guitars is part of George Washington Middle School's Inventions and Innovations class.

Artist of the Year by the DC Blues Society in 2010.

Before Mailloux joined Inventions and Innovations in 2012, students built their guitars with their teacher, Kyle Godfrey, and Anthony Ness, Alexandria Seaport Foundation's director of education. The two worked in partnership to teach engineer-



A STANDARD OUTSIDE. Alexandria's Torpedo Factory, musician Curtis Blues can also be found in schools through his art integration work.

ing concepts to the students.

Using his own cigar box guitar as an example, Mailloux explains the mechanics of the old-fashioned instrument as well as its rich history—a history Mailloux has a deep-rooted passion for.

Before he worked with students, Mailloux was in the mortgage industry and played blues music on the side. It was only after he approached the Council of the Arts of Fairfax County that he realized how to do what he loves full time: "I just decided that I wanted to make the jump and make a living in music, and I got involved with some organizations like the Council of the Arts of Fairfax County, which helped me understand how to [form] my programs for educational purposes. That was my big jump when I realized, 'Wow, I can make a living at this.'"

Since becoming a full-time teaching artist eight years ago, Mailloux has learned that when it comes to connecting with students, authenticity is the key to success.

"I show up as me," says Mailloux. "There's not an option to be anyone else and still have rapport with these young people."

The biggest compliment the blues man has received from students is when they go on to learn other instruments or even perform in bands. Once, a teenager approached Mailloux and told him that he was inspired to learn more music and join a band after watching Mailloux perform outside the Torpedo Factory when he was 4 years old.

"There's no words someone could tell me [that are] better than that," says Mailloux. "That's real impact."