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A Poignant Dialogue

By A.K. Carroll



Mona Golabek Photos provided

When Miramonte instructor Heather Cousins took her advanced drama class to see "The Pianist of Willesden Lane" in December 2013, she had no way of knowing that a single performance would lead to a myriad of meaningful relationships between students and stories. The one-woman show performed by concert pianist and author Mona Golabek depicts the harrowing story of Golabek's mother, Lisa Jura, a young Jewish musician whose dreams are interrupted by the dawn of World War II. It is a story of courage and hope, one that moved Cousins and her students alike.

Shortly after the performance, Cousins penned a letter to Golabek expressing "how impressed and inspired" her class had been by the performance.

"It really entered my heart," said Golabek, who called to personally thank Cousins, establishing the start of a fruitful connection. "I receive much mail, and am always grateful," said Golabek. "Her [Cousins'] words just really connected for me."

Golabek offered Cousins 30 copies of "The Children of Willesden Lane," the book on which "The Pianist of Willesden Lane" is based. Cousins was delighted, and taught the book to her freshman English class the following spring. "My students loved it," she said. "They instantly connected to the themes."

"It's an extremely emotional story," said Miramonte sophomore Sasha Gordon, who was inspired by Jura's determination and strength in the face of the Holocaust. "It ranks amongst best books that I have read."

Sophomore Leah Woodcox agreed. Her favorite part of the story is when Jura is accepted into the Royal Academy of Music. "It is a real, tangible triumph over the hardships that she has faced," said Woodcox. "It's an inspirational moment."

Cousins' students wrote essays on the theme of legacy and did close readings of quotes from "The Children of Willesden Lane," many of them exploring their own ideas regarding what it means to hold onto their dreams. The unit incorporated music, literature and history, culminating in video projects produced by the students. "They said it was the very best thing they'd done all year," said Cousins.

At the end of the unit, Cousins sent samples of the work to Golabek, along with letters from the students thanking her for the books. Golabek was deeply moved by Cousins and her students' work. "She is obviously a deeply dedicated teacher, who goes the extra mile to inspire her students and give them important experiences."

When Cousins learned that Golabek would be returning to Berkeley for a short time in February, she made contact straightaway, asking if Golabek would visit Miramonte. Golabek immediately agreed and insisted that there would be no fee. "I'm doing this from my heart."

In preparation for Golabek's visit, the baby grand is being tuned and three Miramonte English classes are reading "The Children of Willesden Lane." Cousins is reaching out to last year's English

class, sending them personal letters inviting them to Golabek's private performance Thursday, Feb. 12.

"I am so excited," said Gordon. "Mrs. Cousins showed us an excerpt from her show, and my jaw hit the floor." Woodcox echoed Gordon's sentiments, "I'm very excited to see Ms. Golabek perform!"

Golabek's visit will include storytelling and playing the piano, and will reach students who were unable to attend the original performance. "The thought that I will get to see her live and meet her is thrilling," said Gordon. "I can hardly wait!"

"Even though my schedule is quite overwhelming, I knew I had to come to the school and present to her amazing students," said Golabek, who will perform at the Berkeley Repertory Theater through Feb. 22.

In addition to a full month of performing, Golabek is also in the midst of preparing to film "I am a Pianist," an hour-long documentary on the story of Lisa Jura and "The Children of Willesden Lane." Produced in collaboration with KLCS/PBS, the film will feature interviews and concert excerpts, including one from the concert at Miramonte. Cousins and her students have also been invited to participate.

"Some stories are meant to be shared," said Cousins. "This is one of them."



Miramonte High School students read Golabek's book in Heather Cousins's class.

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