



Episode 13: An Interview with Ruth Meints

On this week's podcast, we're talking to Ruth Meints. Ruth is the Executive Director of the Omaha Conservatory of Music and creator of String Sprouts, a program that connects over 1200 students in her community to music lessons. Ruth has a new book out: *The Music Teacher's Little Guide to Big Motivation* and I can't wait to dive in and talk to her all about it.

Christine Goodner:

Well, welcome, everyone! Today I'm excited to be talking to Ruth Meints and Ruth. I hope you would just start by introducing yourself and telling people listening a bit about who you are and what you do.

Ruth Meints:

Great. Well, thank you so much, Christine for having me on your amazing podcast. I'm so honored to be asked. As you said, my name's Ruth Meints and I'm the executive director for the Omaha conservatory of Music. And I also teach violin and viola here.

Christine Goodner:

And I hope we get to talk a little bit about some of what your program is doing, cause you do some really exciting things. I would love to just start by hearing a bit of your origin story as a musician. When did you start music, and what inspired you to start, if you remember?

Ruth Meints:

Well, I didn't start until I was seven. And so, as some Suzuki trained teachers would know and students, you can start earlier than that, right? This would have been in the early seventies. So Suzuki was getting started here in the United States. And when my mom called the area teacher...now I must explain, I was living in Western Nebraska. And so when I say the area teacher, it was THE area teacher. It was the only person that played strings and taught, and there were very few string players in this rural area, but this person had heard about Suzuki. And so they said, "how old is your daughter?" And my mom said, "well, she's seven." And he said, "do you have any other children?" My mom said, "yes, I have another girl who's three." And he said, "we'll take that one. We want to try Suzuki." And my mom said, "No, no, no, she really wants to take." So I was so thankful that my mom said, "You can start when you're seven!" So I was out in the rural area, and there were maybe four other kids that played. And that was kind of when I realized, "wow, I wish the arts was more accessible to me." So even as a young person, I was thinking about all those things that my parents did for me—driving me to lessons that were two and a half hours away every week. So five hours of driving to get me to a lesson. And they made that sacrifice for me. And it was so wonderful. And The camps I went to and all of those things...they took every advantage of every single thing. And I realized, "wow, I want to make this happen for other people because it was so meaningful to me."

Christine Goodner

Thanks for sharing that. I think people may not realize now because things have changed so much- how unusual it was for such young children to play violin back then. And certainly how far you would drive to find a teacher, because now it's like, oh, I hear sometimes like "You're too far away if you're one exit down the highway from me." So it's so different than it used to be.

Ruth Meints:

Yep, I get that too. You know, kids that are not wanting to come in from outer regions for lessons, but there are so many families that are doing that. And that's just so valuable to invest in that because music education does so much for your brain and the connections that you have and changes academic outcomes. I mean, I could go on forever about how valuable it is. So parents that are investing in that, kudos, super kudos. And driving, however far you have to drive to do it, it's worth it.

Christine Goodner

Right! Find a good fit for your child and for your teacher. All of that is so important, absolutely. I always talk on this podcast about practicing. Do you remember liking to practice, or what was your experience like with that growing up?

Ruth Meints:

I think that's such a great question. I'm motivated by achieving things. So if I had goals, like I was going to play at a recital, or I was going to be a part of a show in the pit orchestra, or whatever it was that I was doing, that was very motivating to me to practice, to get ready for something. Now, if I didn't have anything to get ready for if I didn't have any goals that had been set by my teacher or that kind of thing, I might be less likely to be as motivated to practice. And just in the course of practicing, like a general day, I always thought it was hard to get started, but once I got started, it was great. You know? So I think getting past the hurdle of getting started in practice is a really big deal. And if you can figure out a way to do that, you're going to be on your way because usually time goes past and you've done the things you need to do or at least some of them, and that's a successful practice.

Christine Goodner

I love that. I can relate to that even now, you know, it's often hard for me to get started, and then once I do, it's fine. And so I think parents who might be listening and thinking, "maybe my child doesn't like their instrument because it's so hard to start." It's really important to talk about how normal that is, even for professionals and teachers like ourselves sometimes.

Ruth Meints:

Absolutely. And you know, the fact that I didn't always have a goal that was performance-related. You can still set other types of goals with your practice, and that counts too. You know, like, "I'm going to learn all the notes for this section." Or "I'm going to do a unit practice thing every day!" Or whatever it is that you set your goal to be, that can be motivating too.

Christine Goodner

Absolutely. And we don't always have to wait for a teacher to set up the performance opportunity either. Sometimes I hear from parents who say, "Well, my teachers should have more opportunities." And maybe, but you know, we can only do so much as teachers. And you can also set something up online with a family member or play for the non-practicing parent, or the neighbors, or wherever in your community. So you can also create opportunities for your child or maybe your child and a friend. And you don't have to necessarily wait for your teacher if you know, "oh, this is what drives my child."

Ruth Meints

Absolutely. That's such a great idea. You know, I always tell my students, "My job is to make myself extinct if you're doing your own thing, and you know how to practice, and you can learn whatever you want to learn and do whatever

you want to do." So the more independent and autonomous they get, their ability to practice and to set up ways to show their musicianship, bravo!

Christine Goodner

Right, I think so, too. Since we're sort of talking around the edges of the topic of motivation, maybe you could dive into your new book next. I really love this as a resource, it's called *The Music Teacher's Little Guide to Big Motivation*, and we will provide a link to find that in the show notes when this episode is published. So you can look for that if you're listening, but I would love to hear just what inspired you to write the book and what you hope it shares with people?

Ruth Meints

Well, actually the idea to write the book happened a long time ago when I went to a Learning & the Brain conference, which is neuroscientists and academics- people in the academic field or teachers getting together and learning about what the neuroscientists have found and trying to see if there's a way to apply it. Because that bridge is really hard to get across- what we know and learn from research and then the actual application of it. So I went to a conference, and that's where I met Richard LaVoy, who has written the forward to my book. But he also wrote a wonderful book called *Motivation Breakthrough*, where he goes through these eight motivators, and it's more related to academics and that kind of thing. So I thought, "wow!" He was a very inspiring speaker. And I thought, "I need to think about this in a different way, and I want to apply this to my teaching in the studio and see how it works.

So that started a journey for me of thinking about ways to motivate people using these eight motivational styles. And over time, I noticed it was really working! So if I had in my studio a hole in some area where I wasn't using that motivational [strategy], those students might not be quite as motivated. But if I added that into the environment, voilà, that may be motivated them a little bit more to keep going. So I integrated this motivation thing. I talked to Richard LaVoy first, though, by the way, and said, "I have like use your stuff to do wonders." And he read through my manuscript and also gave me permission to use the quiz that he also has in my book. So I also integrated that into the String Sprouts program, which one of the unique elements of that program is that there's a parent education portion every week. I thought, "I'm going to call it *The Music Teachers' Little Guide*, but the reason why I'm going to do that is the parents are teachers, right?" So they can use all of this information as well. So anybody who teaches, which is almost everybody in the Suzuki world or in the Sprouts world, can utilize those motivational styles. I love that you said it was a resource cause that's what I wanted it to be is a resource and a launching pad for other ideas to say, "Hey, I could think about this. This could be a good motivational tool for that." So it's not inclusive of every idea, that's for sure. But hopefully, it will generate even more ideas around it.

Christine Goodner

Yeah. I really enjoyed the quiz. I'll be honest, I looked at it at first, and I was like, "oh, I'm not going to do this." And I was like, "well, I'm not going to get as much out of this if I don't." So I just set a timer because that tends to be my effort sometimes. But I set a timer for like five minutes, and it was easy to get through it, but it did help me really use what I read afterward better. So I encourage those listening who might pick up the book it's really worth taking the time to do that little quiz in there.

Ruth Meints

Yeah. In the Sprout program, we make sure that the parents do take the quiz. And the reason why is because your tendency will be to motivate in the same way you're motivated. So as I mentioned before, I'm motivated by achievement. So an achievement motivator might be having a sticker chart in your studio or some kind of sticker reward system set up that you're using. So for me as a child, a sticker chart would have been motivation enough for me to make sure I got five practices or whatever the goal was of that for the week. So I'm going to motivate using achievement motivators very easily, but maybe, there's another one, like assertiveness might not be one of mine. And so I wouldn't

think of ways to motivate assertive people, right? So this gives me those tools when they don't naturally come to me in a way to motivate that type of person.

Christine Goodner

It was really interesting. Mine were power achievement and affiliation.

Ruth Meints

Oh my gosh, do you want to know something incredibly wild? Those are MY three. We have the same ones.

Christine Goodner

That is funny.

Ruth Meints

And I bet that could be teachers tend to, you know, have those as their main ones, but that's great.

Christine Goodner

It was really interesting to do because I felt like uncomfortable with the power one, maybe a little bit, so I had to think about that one a bit.

Ruth Meints

Well, you know, what's interesting is I didn't, my kids were more grown when I saw Richard LaVoy's talk, but I really, really wished that I would have had them for my own kids because I actually have a child motivated by assertiveness. And what that came across to me, as a power motivated person, is "why is this kid trying to pick a fight with me all the time? Why won't they just..." But in reality, an assertive person needs to be heard and they want their opinion to count. And if I would have just responded, "Wow, I hear what you're saying. I can see why you might feel that way." It probably would have been over and been diffused. So you can see how the power motivator and the assertive motivator- if you don't know about that, there could be a fight when it doesn't have to be.

Christine Goodner

I had to learn that the hard way too. [Such as] my piece of the fights that were going on and how to work on that.

Ruth Meints

Yeah! So I think all of them are very, very valuable motivators. Every motivator is cool. Every one is a great way to be motivated, and we just have to figure out how to diversify our tools of motivating so that we can maximize the impact that we're having in the engagement that we're having.

Christine Goodner

Yeah. For listeners, could you maybe go through a few of the other ones are that we didn't mention yet?

Ruth Meints

Yep. So, gregariousness is one. I like to call those the party animals, you know, and they really, really enjoy being around other people. So in the Suzuki method, the fact that we have group classes is so, so important. Gregarious people in the last year have had a really, really, really tough time because of the isolation and things that have been created with COVID. But I think having those parties and those outings and those times when you can get together are so important for the gregarious motivated people. Also, affiliation, which you mentioned, just being part of something bigger than yourself, those types of people will want all the swag. So they'll want to have the t-shirt for their favorite football team.

We have bags here that are Omaha Conservatory of Music, music bags. So the kids will want those. If they're part of [this group] or The Frontiers, one of our performing ensembles, they want the sweatshirt, you know. So the affiliation of being part of something bigger than yourself... We mentioned the power and achievement [motivators]. There's also status. The achievement and the status people really like the competitions and things like that. We have some teachers on our faculty that don't like to enter their kids in competitions. They want everybody to just get along, but they don't have that motivator. I have a student in my studio who is achievement motivated, and status motivated. She wants to enter all the competitions. So I need to make sure that's available to her to do, you know and train her up to have a good reaction when she doesn't win. There are learning opportunities surrounding each one of those. So I think all eight of them, and I may have missed a couple of them, but there's a list in the back [of the book] of some tools to use to motivate that type of learner or motivation style. And of course, once you start, then you can start to come up with other ideas. It kind of feeds the, you know, you feed it, and it's like, "wow, this is really fun." I see it's impacting a student.

Also, the fact that usually, most people come up with several; I think we're all sometimes motivated by status...we're all motivated at different times by things, but the primary ones sometimes may flux depending upon what that student is also experiencing. So I think there are levels of motivation. And if you have a student who's very intrinsically motivated, meaning they want to practice all the time. They may get into a very busy time in their life, and they may float down where you have to say, "Okay, this student is not as motivated now. Let's find out what's going on. Is there anything I can help to increase that motivation?" I think it's a fun way to think about students because if they're not motivated, it's going to be hard to teach them. So the first thing we have to do is figure out how to reach that student. And then the teaching becomes much easier. A couple that I didn't mention. There are two: inquisitiveness and autonomy, which are very like people that like to do things on their own alone, and the inquisitiveness- their favorite question is why the student that's always asking "why, why, why?" I have one student that is their two main motivators. And so, I give them research projects all the time. And I'm amazed by what they come back with. I asked them to listen to five performers and categorize the tempo that they were playing something; they were working on a major concerto onto them to get a range of what the professionals were using for their tempo. Well, she didn't do five. She did 10.

Christine Goodner

Wow.

Ruth Meints

And then she wrote a short paragraph on, on the other details about the performances that she liked and how they differed. I was like, "wow, this is, this is exactly inquisitiveness in action", you know?

Christine Goodner

As a teacher, I was looking through all the recommendations for all the different types and just thinking, okay, some of these I just put into my program automatically, and some of these I hadn't thought about. I need to incorporate a few of these that hadn't occurred to me or I wasn't aware of because there are likely students I'm working with that are missing something that I could do. And it's not like it's all on our shoulders alone as the teacher, that the students are motivated at every moment, but just, am I doing everything I can to reach all the students?

Ruth Meints

Exactly. Right. I think that's, that's one of the really neat things about Suzuki teachers is the way in which they always think about how can I do better? How can I learn? And that learning spirit. And I think that learning spirit goes out to the students and they feel that, and they also become learners themselves, which is, of course, when you, when you stop learning, you might as well, you know, check your bags or whatever, because you know, you've got to learn your whole life or you're going to really get stagnant, and growth is great.

Christine Goodner

Yeah. Well, I think this is a great way for parents and other caregivers and adults who might practice with young children to think about what motivates this specific child. And then also for teachers to think about, "okay, am I covering all my bases? And like, not just motivating them the way I would be motivated or the way my teacher motivated me." Such a great resource. I hope people will pick this up, and it sparks lots of thinking and conversation.

Ruth Meints

Yeah. I think with our younger students also, you know, a parent might be working with a really young student. So as I mentioned, we have it in the String Sprouts program, and those kids start when they're three or four, well, a three and a four-year-old can't really fill out their own, but a parent can fill it out for them. The actual quiz itself, which is interesting, was developed by the Mattel toy company, and it was developed so that they could understand what made kids want to buy certain toys or want certain toys. So I think taking it for your child when they're really young and then, you know, we talk about it with the parents. "Okay. What does that mean to you? What are some ways you've motivated? What are some things that haven't worked, and why do you think now knowing that maybe your child has this motivational style?" I think it's been useful even for the very, very young students that can't fill it out for themselves. There's still value there.

Christine Goodner

Yeah, absolutely. Well, since we're mentioning your String Sprouts program, I wonder if you could tell listeners a bit about what that is and what you do in that program.

Ruth Meints

Oh yeah. Thanks so much for asking about that. String Sprouts is one of the really cool programs we have here going in, in Omaha. And we have about 1,200 students. Yeah. You heard that right. 1,200 students that are studying in String Sprouts, and it's at no cost. It's for underserved and under-resourced areas. We provide them with an instrument for five years of the curriculum. We start them when they're around three or four. So when I wrote this curriculum, I combined two things from the Suzuki world, which were: starting really young and also having caregiver involvement. I say caregiver because sometimes it's an older sibling or a grandma, or it's somebody in their world that's willing to come to all five years of classes and practice with them and all of that.

So we have those two elements from Suzuki and then also two elements from El Sistema, which is a program developed down in Venezuela. And it was for older kids after school. So the two elements we took from that are providing the instrument, which is often a barrier, not being able to have an instrument or have the access. And then also we go to their neighborhood so that they can easily get to class. These classes happen all over the Omaha Metro area, council Bluffs, there's a program in Kansas City that's going, and we have several programs in California that are getting ready to start and maybe Florida. So there are areas that are thinking about how they could implement a string sprouts program. The unique features of the program are the caregiver involvement for all five years and the age of which we start them.

The repertoire for the class is all written by my oldest son Dryden. And he was a violin, viola player. He started when he was two and a half and actually ended up being a voice major, but is a very accomplished violist. So he wrote all the music, and it's very catchy things like Rockabilly Blues Tune and Pyramids of Giza. And they're all what we would call pre twinkle levels. So things you would learn prior to playing twinkle and the Suzuki repertoire. But it's very easy to teach in a group and very engaging. So the students really want to practice a lot and get out their instruments and play. We also have video-web practicing tools, so they can practice with me playing on a video or an audio recording, and we get just thousands of hits per week with people practicing using that tool as well. The exciting part about it is what our program evaluation has shown. So we did a robust outside investigator program evaluation on various areas, specifically related to vocabulary development. And that's an area where we're going to even do a little bit more because we have such astounding results. So we wanted to have a highly significant impact, which meant we had to reach a certain level in the vocabulary testing with the kids. And we did not get highly significant. We got four times highly significant. Our investigator said, "This is unbelievable results in vocabularies. You should take a closer look at this." So that's what we're

planning to do. And all of the other things we studied, which were parent-child closeness and behavioral things like initiative and flexibility, all of those also rose. So we have really good results from our program evaluation on the impact, which is what we were trying to do.

Christine Goodner

That's amazing. If people want to hear more from you about how they could start a program like this or along those lines, what's the best way for them to get in touch with you?

Ruth Meints

You can visit <http://stringsprouts.org/>, or we're going to do a virtual training for Sprouts Level One in January, which on our <https://omahacm.org/> the Omaha conservatories website you can find things about string sprouts there, or get connected as well, but that way people can utilize it in their neighborhoods and in how they get trained on it, they get access to the curriculum. Then you can use it if you have a program where you just want to use it as like a pre-twinkle. So we had our first Suzuki Institute this summer. It was so exciting. What was really exciting about it was we had 50 sprouts that attended. So basically, our pre-twinkle area had 50 kids in it. So if you have a pre-twinkler and you want to go to a Suzuki Institute, you should come to Omaha!

Christine Goodner

Congratulations.

Ruth Meints

So apparently that was a huge part of our Suzuki Institute was pre-twinklers. So, that was fun.

Christine Goodner

That's wonderful. Like you said, from your own childhood and growing up, those group camp/music camp type experiences are really amazing.

Ruth Meints

I know, yeah! I wish I could have gone to, did you go to Suzuki institutes when you were younger?

Christine Goodner

I didn't. No. Other camps that I loved, but now I wish I had to.

Ruth Meints

I sure wish I would've had that opportunity. When I was at Learning & the Brain, there were two researchers, Deci, and Ryan who did research on intrinsic motivation, and they came up with three things that you need so autonomy and being good at it. And then also doing it in an environment that values it. So relatedness, and autonomy, and being competent basically are the three things that make intrinsic motivation. And so when you go to an Institute, or you enroll in a group class, or you get involved in a musical community, that's that relatedness piece. It's so motivating for students to see others doing it and valuing it. So I think Institute shows we value this. Our family vacation is surrounding this or playing music in your environment at home, or going to a concert, making a priority, going to your classes, lessons are a priority. All of that feeds into those three things that will eventually get your child, so they want to do it.

Christine Goodner

Exactly. And for non-Suzuki listeners, an Institute is basically a summer camp, but the adult or caregiver (parents, grandparent, whoever) is supporting the student, comes with the student, and there are masterclasses and group classes and often supplemental music theory or orchestra experiences for students. It's a really immersive family experience for a week, which is really special.

Ruth Meints

Yeah. We have another summer camp called Sound Waves, and that one is for any level, and it's, you know, Suzuki, non-Suzuki and has all of those elements as well. So there's lots of things to do in the summer surrounding music. And you should take a big advantage of that. I always think my mom always said, "while you're not practicing, somebody else is." That was my mom's favorite thing to say, "Thanks, mom!" [Laughs]

Christine Goodner

[Laughs] Oh my gosh. I think a lot of people in the last year thought about "how do I better serve my community in a wider, broader, more inclusive fashion?" And so it seems like you have a good model so people can look into and think about how they might do that.

Ruth Meints

Yes. And we have some really, really fantastic teachers who have Grazzia Rode-Sagastume here, who is a Suzuki trained teacher, but teachers in the Sprouts program almost full time. It's been a great connector of teachers coming from all over the country to work here. Candace Jorgensen is our director for community engagement, and she runs the whole sprouts program, which is huge, and [she is a] fantastic cellist. Just having a really nice team of teachers that their goal is to make music accessible, and we have two pillars at the conservatory, accessibility, and excellence and how you balance those two things and make sure that every program you're offering has those intrinsic motivators so that they're valuable. And you get as many people having a music education as possible because it's going to really impact their lives long term.

Christine Goodner

And that's an encouragement to parents listening, who might have students, whatever they do for their career later, the study of music teaches us so much that adults say they take with them for life, even if they go into a totally different profession. So it's so valuable.

Ruth Meints

They have BrainVolts Lab at Northwestern University. If you go to BrainVolts lab website, they have all of this documentation that they've done. They've done so much studying of music and its impact. They have all these great slides and and, you know, it's very accessible information about what music actually does. And I think, with their work, they're doing a lot of testing on adults, but they could tell if you were an adult and you studied for two years, any musical instrument when you were younger, and they hook you up to their brain machines, they'll be able to tell that you studied music by what they see, even if you don't tell them. So that's pretty interesting to know; you get maximum impact with five years of study. But with two years, you've made significant connections in your brain that will be very beneficial for out your life. So that's a fun place to look and get more support and validation.

Christine Goodner

We'll include the link to that as well in the show notes. That's great because that's things that we kind of know from watching students as teachers, but communicating that clearly and seeing the actual science behind it, that's really amazing.

Ruth Meints

Right. Anecdotally, we can all tell stories, you know, millions of stories about, I saw this in action, but it's really nice to have that specific data that says, no, this is real.

Christine Goodner

Not just a nice story, but a fact, yeah, I love to wrap up our interview is asking if there's a tip that you could leave parents and other caregivers practicing with children with about practice, what would you like to leave people with today?

Ruth Meints

I think the most important thing is every little bit counts. I think a lot of times, we get caught up in this idea of perfectionism, and we've got to do all of the things that our practice session. And if we don't do all the things, then we, we didn't do it, or we failed or something like that. Every little bit counts. It's all important. Even getting that one little bow hold made or just that practice on that one tricky section is progress. You did it! That should be celebrated, right? Every small step counts. I think as a person who's very driven. I want to reach every single thing, goal, every single thing that I want to do. And I have to realize every little bit counts. So I'm telling myself that, you know, and I think that that was important with my own kids in practicing. We got something done, and that's what counts.

Christine Goodner

We're really on a marathon, not a sprint. So we're just going to keep going and going.

Ruth Meints

Right! That's such a good way to say it. The tortoise won the race, the tortoise won! [laughs]

Christine Goodner

Exactly. Exactly. Well, thank you so much. It was a pleasure to speak with you and I hope we get to do this again sometime in the future.

Ruth Meints

Yeah. Christine, thank you so much. This was a lot of fun. I really appreciate you asking me and thanks so much.

My Three Takeaways

1. Understanding what motivates us (or our children or students) is so important.
2. We tend to try to motivate others the way WE are motivated, so learning about many types of motivation is important when motivating others.
3. Every little bit of practice counts. It's all important and we can and should celebrate all along the way.