



Episode 34: An Interview with Courtney Woodward

Christine Goodner:

All right. Hello, everyone. Today, I'm excited to be talking to Courtney Woodward and Courtney I was hoping you could share with everyone a bit about who you are and what you do, especially in the world of music.

Courtney Woodward:

Hi, Christine, thanks so much for having me on your podcast. I really appreciate it. So I have been a music teacher for the past 15 years. I've been out of the classroom, gosh, in March, it'll be almost be two years outside of the classroom. And so with that background, I started playing piano way back in like third grade, and I took band and all those things as a kid. And it wasn't until I was a junior in high school. When I became drum major of the marching band, where I actually had the chance to teach and kind of get into that world and realizing that I really loved it, especially teaching music. So then went to college. I went to East Carolina University and got my music education degree, K through 12 [a] band course orchestra. And then from there I went straight into as a 22 year old teaching high school.

So I was teaching the 18 year olds, [as] this 22 year old coming in trying to be the leader of 18 year olds. So that was fun. <laughs> I taught marching band and concert band. I did all the spring musicals, music theory, percussion. So that was a really fun time. I love that age group. And then once I had my first child, my son, it was time to make a change to where I could, you know, be home more with my own children. And so I switched and was able to teach orchestra at the middle school level. So six through eight for eight years. Yeah. So 15 years in the classroom. And it was half of my career was in the classroom as a teacher.

Christine Goodner:

Before we talk about your new book, which is being published today, and I'm very excited to share with listener about, in this podcast, we talk a lot about practicing. And I wonder when you think about your own practicing, growing up or helping students with practice in the classroom, what comes up for you about learning to practice and what can help students practice? I'd love to hear more about that.

Courtney Woodward:

Oh gosh. Well, that's, that's always the, the case with, with the young students. And I remember even as, as a young student just starting with piano, it practicing felt like a chore and so was not as much fun. And I think a lot of it had to do with, cause I didn't have a sense of...I was young, I didn't know how have a sense of what practice should look like or what I should be doing.

So when I was a teacher and I was teaching students, I think the main thing for me was especially at the middle school level, which is where I ended was keep it short it simple, but always focus on a problem area. Because I think most kids, at least most of my students would say, "oh, well I practiced for three hours." But they were just playing the stuff that they really enjoyed and then the stuff that they already knew.

So it was always important to say, "okay, well you have to find at least one problem area and then shrink it down to that one problem area." Whether that's four or five measures, whether that's an entire phrase and the other thing was with practicing, they would always go back to the beginning and it was like, "no, you can't go back to the beginning. You've got to start at the problem area and fix that one problem area and shrink it down to just a short amount of time. So that way you had this huge focus." So that was always the key. It was also like, "okay, well you have to keep it short and then end with a positive note, play the stuff that you love, play the stuff that you know, keep that for the end."

So you end on this happy note and you're not so frustrated with whether you successfully fix that problem or whether you're still in the trenches with that problem. You know? So it was important to end on a high note to keep practicing. And I had practice logs and all that kind of stuff. And it was begrudgingly something that the kids did, it's important to practice, but at the same token, they had to note the structure of a practice session, keep it short and focus on a main problem and end with a high note.

Christine Goodner:

Oh, I so agree with that advice. I think whatever feeling we're leaving the practice room with on a given day, that's what comes to mind when we're getting ready to start the next day.

Courtney Woodward:

Exactly.

Christine Goodner:

For me, it's really a motivation thing. If I leave the practice room feeling like, "oh, that was horrible." Then of course I don't want to do it tomorrow.

Courtney Woodward:

Exactly. And it was like, I think half the battle is just your mindset about it. You know, like, "oh, I've got to go in and do this, you know, fix this one problem." But if you can end it on a high note and end it on a positive thing, then it'll keep you coming back.

Christine Goodner:

I think sometimes it feels like, well, my child should want to do this, but then I think practice can feel like the running laps for soccer or the swimming laps for swimming. Of course some students find it fun just to do those things for themselves. But I think for most students it's really the results from that. Like we get to play in the soccer game because we have run all those laps and we've gone to the soccer practice all week long. So the fun part comes later for most students in my experience, sometimes we do all that

practice in the practice room and then we get to do the fun part of playing in the recital or being a part of the orchestra concert. And the reward comes from what we get to do because we practice.

Courtney Woodward:

Right! And it was like, "okay, well you have to have the mindset of this is not this orchestra concert or this soccer game or whatever is not going to happen without that practice." I had a lot of kids on swim team and oh man, was that a whole world. And they were up at four 30 in the morning in that pool. It's the same thing, just like sports, if you can relate practice to something else they're already doing, it makes more sense and that light bulb starts to turn on.

Christine Goodner:

Yes, my brother, well, all my siblings were on the swim team, but I was much older. My parents would be out of town. Sometimes I was in charge of waking one particular brother up to go to swim practice. And yeah, we had heated arguments about how not want to get out of bed to go. And he certainly wanted to be on the swim team and participate in swim meets and be with his friends, but yeah, going to practice, not so much.

Courtney Woodward:

Exactly. So it's music is the same is the same way. It's like if you want to have that really good concert or whatever festival you're going to, or whatever performance you're having, you've got to put in that extra work. That's why ensembles were so fun because it was so fun to go with your friends and work with your friends. So that makes it easier. Whereas individualized practice is tough because you've got to motivate yourself and kids have to know how to do that. So providing that structure for them, start small work on a problem, end on a happy note. It's kind of like the three bullet points that will help 20 to 30 minute lesson.

Christine Goodner:

So important for us to remember when we're practicing with young musicians who can't yet see the big picture for themselves, you know, how do we make it more tolerable for them and help them end on that happy high note? Well, I would love to hear more about your new book, "Family Dynamics." I know today is the launch publishing date and love to hear about the process behind it and how this new children's book about music came to be.

Courtney Woodward:

Yeah. I had actually come up with this idea a couple years ago. It was in my last year of teaching actually. And it was in the middle of class in the middle of eighth grade orchestra class. I was of those kids so much, but we were just having a conversation. It was like on a break in the middle of rehearsal and we took a stretch break and it was like, "wouldn't it be cool?" Because my students, especially in the orchestra setting, they always felt a little bit ostracized. They were a little bit like, "oh, well band does this, or chorus as this, this many people got into district band" or whatever, like all the comparisons. And so it was like, "we're all doing the same thing. And so wouldn't it be fun to have a violin be the main character, the strings have their spotlight, but they're meeting all these other instruments and realizing that they're all important and they can all come together and create this beautiful music."

And so I came home that day, that afternoon after school and I just started writing on computer paper, I just started scribbling and then it just sat on my piano for a couple years. And so when I left the classroom and I had started my own business, I kind of took a break. I started to get that itch again of

like, "oh, I miss this part of music, I miss... as of right now being in the classroom, [it] wasn't right for me. But I miss the teaching of music and I'm doing it with my kids now they're at the right age to where they can really start to soak it in. So I started doing that and then this book, I just had this idea sitting here and it was like, it's time, it's time to start doing this. And so yeah, I had found my illustrator online on social media, the of power of social media, right?

And we just kick started this whole project and starting to see it come to life, and the process. You really have to dive into this whole new world, right. Even getting out of teaching the whole new world of entrepreneurship and everything like that. It was mind blowing because I guess as teachers we kind of were in this bubble and you feel like that's all you know, and it's kind of daunting and overwhelming to get in a different world, but it's been really fun. And as teachers and musicians were just kind of life learners, so it was like, "okay, I'm ready to soak up as much information as I can." And the process has been so fun. It's been about a six month process. And from start to finish, from having the idea from going with an editor and editing down the developmental ideas to then making sure your grammar, you do, you know, dotted all your eyes and crossed all your Ts and all that kind of stuff.

And then making sure the illustrations are detailed. It was so important to me to have the instruments look real, not kind of in a silly format, but a five year old can read this book and go in real life and say, "oh, that's an oboe. Oh, that's a bassoon. I've seen that before. That's part of the symphony orchestra." That was my main goal. And so seeing the illustrations come to life and bring that idea to the forefront, those visuals are so fun. So the process has been amazing and thrilling and a roller coaster of emotions, just like anything, when you're trying to strive for something, you're going have ups and downs, but you just have to keep pushing forward. But it's been such an amazing process and I can't wait to start the next book. So it's called "Family Dynamic: Embrace Your Sound".

Courtney Woodward:

And it's all about Violin. She goes around the music store, she kind of gets misplaced by a young student. Here's this music throughout the music store. She's always with her family at the front of the store with the string family, she gets misplaced and she goes, "oh, I can finally go find where these sounds are coming from." She's worried because she can't make those same sounds. And so she meets all the instrument families along the way. Kids will learn a little bit about each instrument family and how they make a sound and what they look like. And then she learns about herself too. You know, within my music class, it was always important to incorporate life lessons. And that's what music does. Life lessons are everywhere. And so the life lesson in this one is just making sure that you embrace yourself, you embrace your sound, you realize that your sound and your voice can come together with others and really create that beautiful music.

Courtney Woodward:

So there's so many life lessons to pull from within the story, which I'm really excited about, but they can find it on Amazon. They can find it online at anywhere where you can buy a book, hard cover, paperback, Kindle. So all the versions are there. And I really foresee it being beautiful for any young family's home because my goal is I want music education to be accessible, and I want them to start young and it doesn't have to be in school where they learn it. It can be at home whenever they're reading to their kids at night and, and also in classroom for elementary school music teachers, it can really be a great resource or private lessons or things like that. It can be a great resource for kids and

hopefully it's fun. I hope that when they look at the book, they find something new each time. The illustrations are so amazing that I think every page has something eye catching and fun to look at.

Christine Goodner:

Yes, I'm really excited to have a copy of this in my studio. I like to have lots of picture books about music and because I'm a violin teacher, the violin, I got to have a sneak peek at this book before it's officially published. And I really love the illustrations. In fact, I was looking through and I think my very favorite is the percussion family.

Courtney Woodward:

Oh, how fun, right?

Christine Goodner:

There's so many different instruments and they have these delightful facial expressions. I think that illustrator did a great job.

Courtney Woodward:

Oh, she did such a fun job because she, she paid so much attention into detail, but at the same token, they're so personable and relatable and fun. So very cute and you're right with the percussion. It was like, "okay, your family is huge." And so there's plenty to look at and plenty to learn and plenty to spark questions from kids. That's the whole goal is to ignite wonder and curiosity and ignite some questions from them. So they start to learn.

Christine Goodner:

And it's such a fun introduction to all the different instruments. Of course, there's instruments that everybody knows about. But for example, the viola people are always asking me, "what is a viola?" Thinking about percussion as well, I think growing up, I knew about the timpani and drums maybe, but not all these other instruments. So I think it's a great way to share more information about the different instrument families.

Courtney Woodward:

Yeah. And in a fun, sweet way with a little bit of heart mixed in.

Christine Goodner:

We'll make sure we share links for people to be able to find their own copy of the book in the show description or show notes. And then is there any way people can connect with you on social media if they want to follow what you're up to as an author?

Courtney Woodward:

Yes. They can find me on Instagram, Courtney Woodward author, and then same with Facebook. He'll find me with the URL, Courtney Woodward author for Facebook, and then Courtneywoodward.com you can find, and they can email me. They can contact me. I love to chat. I love to connect with other music educators or moms who are interested, incorporating music at home or whatever. I love to chat and kind of learn about people so they can connect with me in those three ways.

Christine Goodner:

I always think as someone who has written and published a couple of books, that it's such a process creating something like this, and I go from all this excitement of "yay, I get to share this." And also like, "oh no, someone else is going to read this besides me."

Courtney Woodward:

That's exactly right. Oh, what an emotional rollercoaster.

Christine Goodner:

Exactly. I think it reminds me of music so much because it's very personal, but then also we're creating this thing outside of ourselves. So I just wondered, was there anything about the process of writing the book that came to mind for you that is really related to the process of learning music?

Courtney Woodward:

Oh, I mean, it's exactly related to music. I mean, think about just as a music educator and was getting ready for a concert. It's the same emotional rollercoaster. It only with an ensemble. You're also going along that emotional rollercoaster with your students and they're having their own emotions. And so you're trying to compile yours and theirs and keep it all balanced, which can be tough, especially with middle schoolers, it's all the same thing. And it's...You're trying to find that end result. And you're trying to create art that people can relate to and people can connect with. Everything relates to music. I mean, you can't deny it [whether it] be sports, writing a book, anything with life that you're doing, it relates because you're going through that same process of the emotions of saying, "I have these big feelings and I want to share it with the world. And I want to share this art that I've put so much of my heart and soul in. And then to be judged at the end." These kids in the ensemble, they're going to be judged if it's at a concert by their parents, by their family, by their peers. If it's at a festival by the judges, it's a thing, but at the same token, you have to realize that if you have it in you and you have this want, you have to go for it. And it's the same thing with practicing. And the same thing with music is what do you want the end result to be? And if that's what you want, then you have to put the work in behind it and before it, and you also have to be okay with putting yourself out there. And that's what we do every time as teachers get on stage and we put ourselves out there every time you get in a classroom or private lesson, you're putting yourself out there and you're putting your knowledge out there and you have to be okay with that at some point. And just, just go for it.

Christine Goodner:

Exactly. And I don't know if you can relate this, but I just always feel like, just when I feel like I'm almost there or almost done, then there's just a million nitpicky details that still have to be addressed.

Courtney Woodward:

Yes. Oh, I have to say, so the end of this, the process of writing this book and thinking and relating to, "okay, this is the last rehearsal before concert." It was the same exact emotion because it was inevitable that, that last rehearsal before a performance, everything fell apart, you know, and it was like, wait a second. We, you were fine yesterday. And now all of a sudden, the emotions of everything coming to head is like, "oh, we're actually here at this point, the same as this book, I'm actually here at this point. And so now I'm nitpicking every single detail and going, is this really okay? Is this okay?" And you kind of have to get yourself out of the way and, and, and really just go for it and realize that all of your hard work has, has brought you to this point. And at this point you just have to put it out there.

Christine Goodner:

I'm thinking about that attention to detail. I feel like with out that time pressure, at least for me, I don't have enough pressure to feel like, "oh, I have to get all these little details, right. This is the time to do it."

Courtney Woodward:

Yes. And you just have to, at some point, just go, "okay, this is it." And the drop of the baton, here we go, we're on this ride and we have to just go with it. And, I always taught my students, it was like, "well, you have to be able to recover." Recovery is key. It really is all mindset. And with the practicing too, the big thing everyone talks about is practice makes perfect. And it's just not true. And so I had a big mural in my classroom and it said, practice makes permanent. And that was always in my 15 years, that was always what I leaned on with the kids was you're not trying or reaching for perfection. It just doesn't exist, but you have to be able to recover in the moment. You have to know how to do that. You have to realize that all of your practice, whether the performance was great or not has made this information more permanent in your brain and made more permanent in your fingers, in your muscle memory and things like that. Everything is more permanent, the more work you put put towards it. And so I think that mindset changing that mindset in kids and ourselves is key for practice or for performance, or, you know, writing your own book or whatever you're trying to do. It is just realizing that you're still learning. And that's still an accomplishment there it's hugely successful or successful enough for you or got a two instead of a superior rating. It's the process that matters and it's the permanent information that you've gained from it.

Christine Goodner:

Absolutely. And I think sometimes there's this big pull between the fact that we want to be picky and pay attention to detail and musicians have to do that. We have to be fairly picky, but if we're only feeling like it's worth doing, if we're going to be perfect, then we're going to be very unhappy all of the time.

Courtney Woodward:

Right. Right. And it also kind of sucks out the life of it. A musician, if you're so focused on making sure the trail is exactly timed out, or the tone is perfect at every single point, it's like we've lost the of it. And we're just focusing on the technical part. And it's like the illustrations with the book, you can't expect perfection. It has to be, have a feeling behind it too. It has to have kind of a balance between the two and you're not connecting. And that's, I think that's what we forget about as musicians is that's the whole point of why we're making music is to connect and evoke emotion from people. If we too caught up in the technical side of things, we're losing the heart and that aspect of it, that was always with my students. It was like, we've got to create a goosebump moment. If you don't have a goosebump moment, you're not doing it right. Even if you played it perfectly, if I didn't feel anything from it, we didn't do our job.

Christine Goodner:

And just to be clear, neither of us is saying that technical parts are not important. You were very picky you with your illustrations. I remember seeing you share them on social media and how accurate you were being and going back and fixing little details.

Courtney Woodward:

Yeah. And it's so funny too, because now with the illustrations, when I was looking at it from a different perspective, because it was like, I looked at instruments all day long as a teacher, but now that I'm

putting them in illustrations. Oh my gosh, I focused so much on the trumpet that I forgot about the F holes in the string instruments. Like what am I doing? And it's so funny when you have that new perspective that you all of a sudden, like things slip your mind and you have to go back and realize, "oh wait a second, I completely forgot about this." So yeah, it was, that was very interesting about the illustrations because everything had to be so detailed, but then you'd forget the simple stuff.

Christine Goodner:

And I really do think it's the artistic part to balance all those technical details and excellence with what kind of heart is coming through here. And there's no way to do that perfectly. So that's where the artistic part comes in.

Courtney Woodward:

Right. And I kept having to tell myself like this is a picture book, it has to also be fun and not so technical and not so much information at the, a kid where it feels so educational, you know, it still has to be fun and a fun story. So I had to always kind of remind myself and bring myself back down, wait a second.

Christine Goodner:

I love what you're saying about how our mindset and what we say to ourselves is so important. Music, writing, books, everything.

Courtney Woodward:

Yes. Have you read the book? The Inner Game of Music? Well, it's, I mean, it's the exact same thing, right? We're constantly talking ourselves out of this. And I, especially during a flute performance or something, when I was playing my instrument for a concert, I constantly talked myself out of things. And I was in the moment, I was talking to myself and I couldn't shut my voice up. I couldn't shut my brain up. So it's, it's the same thing. It really is mindset. Whether it's practicing or performing or, you know, whatever dream you have, it's mindset and it's getting yourself out of the way.

Christine Goodner:

Yes, absolutely. So fun to talk with you. I can't wait for people to get a copy of this book. The illustrations are delightful and I love the story and introduction to the families of instruments.

Courtney Woodward:

Yeah. Hopefully my, hopefully it'll be parents and their kids, you know, saying, "oh, well I didn't even know this." Maybe they're learning something too. And even older kids, I hope it sparks some interest in curiosity and also teaches kids too. You know, it's okay to be you. And it's okay to be different. And it's okay if your family looks different. So we can still all come together and create beautiful music.

Christine Goodner:

What an important message. I love it. Thanks for being here. Hoping lots of children get this book in their hands and wishing you all the best as this book goes out into the world. Thanks so much for being here and taking time to speak with us.

Courtney Woodward:

Thank you so so much. I appreciate it.