

# Pitching in: Supporting musical education in Jamaica

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Equip to Serve donated the pictured instruments to the music department at Maggotty High School in Jamaica, along with a bass guitar, acoustic guitar, drum kit, recorders and three keyboards, which are not shown in the picture.

The organizer: Karen Walls

The pitch: Creating Equip to Serve

The reason: To support musical education in Jamaica

Karen Walls spent most of her youth growing up in rural Jamaica and tagging along to church services with her parents who were missionaries.

She returned to Canada at 14 and didn't go back to Jamaica again for 30 years when she travelled to the island for a holiday. During that visit, Ms. Walls went to the church where she spent so much time as a child. She was surprised to see a new keyboard and some sound equipment left untouched.

The keyboard and several other instruments had been donated by congregations in North America, but no one knew how to play them. "And right in that moment my mind went, 'We're so good at sending stuff, but nobody is teaching them how to use it,'" Ms. Walls recalled from her home in Oakville, Ont., where she teaches music. "So I just decided I'm going back and I'm going to teach how to read music, how to play instruments."

That led her to launch Equip to Serve in 2012, a charity that offers week-long training sessions every summer in some of Jamaica's poorest rural areas. Around 60 people attend the five-day program, which includes instruction in everything from drums and bass guitar to vocals and keyboard. About 10 music teachers from Canada and the United States offer the training as volunteers.

For the rest of the year, Equip to Serve provides resources and curriculum ideas to local teachers. The charity also sends donated instruments to schools, churches and music clubs. It helps individuals learn to play but insists that anyone who wants a donated instrument must earn it by doing some volunteer work on a local farm run by a Polish charity.

The program is expanding next summer for an extra week to include courses on coding and art. The charity's annual budget is around \$20,000, which is funded through donations. Ms. Walls hopes to raise \$30,000 next year to cover the travel costs for four artists and to buy more school supplies.

Ms. Walls said she feels blessed to be supporting the community where she grew up. "Every year when I go I think 'If you make one step forward, that's progress,'" she said. "Sometimes it's big steps and sometimes it's little steps. But as long as it's forward, I feel really, really good about that."