

# Exhilaration is playing all that jazz with a pro

By Evonne Coutros

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RIDGEWOOD - As Jack Wright walked out of Winberie's restaurant in the heart of the business district, the 18-year old was nearly speechless. "It's nice to have my music go to another level with a professional," said Wright, a saxophone player with the 25-member Ridgewood High School Big Band. "It's just inspiring." Wright had just finished playing the song "Delta City Blues" with professional jazz saxophonist Darmon Meader, a founder of the famed New York Voices.

Along with the big band, the high school's jazz lab of about 21 students had the chance to play with Meader on Tuesday night at the annual Jazz at Winberie's performance. It was the third year for the event, which drew patrons from Bergen and Passaic counties. Wright was proud of showing his stuff with a noted vocalist, arranger, and composer who is 24 years his senior. "As we continued to play, I just kind of let go and played what came to me," Wright said. "I lost my inhibitions. I was playing in my own zone. I was having a lot of fun."

Meader formed New York Voices in 1987 and has recorded in the United States and abroad. He is involved in music education as a clinician and a guest artist on the high school and college level. "He is so inspirational in his talents," said Kelly Ebbels, 18, an alto saxophone player. "We're playing 'Skylark' and 'Isn't It Romantic' [at rehearsals with Meader] and he'd done so much work on both those charts in making them very much his own.

"Having a piece that is so personal to the guest artist who arranged it - and have him know exactly what he wants out of his music - makes this a very cool experience," Ebbels said.

Whitney Clark - like Wright and Ebbels - graduates in June. The trombonist, 18 was impressed with Meader's approach. "He's very understanding and knows how to work with students our age," Clark said. "That's extremely helpful. He's very encouraging when we played something well and was constructive in his criticism."

The teens breezed through songs such as "On the Sunny Side of the Street," Doug Beach's "The Red Bank Express" (in honor of Count Basie"), the funk rock tune "Fowl Play," and the song "Birdland." Meader played with the young artists and improvised on several solos. "I'm pleased the students were at ease," Meader said. "We all look back at people who influenced us when we were in high school and college. More often than not, it was these people who could just hang out and talk to you that drew you to your passion - helping you find your voice."

Jeffrey G. Haas, the director of bands at Ridgewood High School, and Gary Fink, the director of jazz and percussion at the school, had no trouble securing Meader for the gig. He's been an Haas' friend for about seven years. Meader has performed and recorded with artist including Paquito D'Rivera, Nancy Wilson, Don Sebesky, Ray Brown, and the Count Basie Orchestra. But Tuesday's concert was just as important as playing with the big names. "Music on a high school level is learning about work ethic, communication, and working in a group," Meader said. "Most of these students are playing at a really good level, and some

are interested in going on to study music - which is exciting. But many will go on to other careers and fields. The skills they learn in music will apply to whatever they pursue." Between foot-tapping numbers, Haas praised the school district's diverse music curriculum. "As a district, Ridgewood has historically been supportive of the arts," Haas said.

"Richie Allevé, 16, said that unlike the seniors in the group, he'll be back at Winberie's for more jamming. "Music is one of the most important things I have," said the sophomore. "It's a medium for me to be social and meet people from many different walks of life. Playing at Winberie's means other people can appreciate our music. It's a different audience. "It's great."