

Different drummers: Circle moves to its own beat

Circle: Drummers find peace through rhythm

By Brian Bushard

bbushard@inkym.com Mark Palmer considers himself an unusual person. It's a characteristic that comes out mostly on Tuesday nights, when he carries a wooden djembe, a type of African drum, to the staircase at Stone's Beach on the south shore. For the next two hours, he pounds away on the drum, forming improvised beats alongside a group of 10 to 20 people he also considers unusual.

"We're all outside the mainstream, but that's what I like about it," said Palmer, who started the drum circle seven years ago with Gary Langley. "We're not trying to sound good. We're just trying to feel good, and give people an experience drumming."

The group has no permanent home. Every Tuesday afternoon, members who have happened by in the past, played, and had enough of an interest to come back, receive a text message telling them where to go: Stone's Beach, the youth hostel on Western Avenue, the Unitarian Meeting House on Orange Street.

What comes out of the drum circle is always a loud pulsing sound Langley finds peaceful. Sometimes it's a rhythm. Sometimes it's completely free-form. "I feel it in my body, I feel it in my bones," Langley said. "It's a percussion and a rhythm, and if we're in the right flow, I can get literally lost in the music where I'm almost not there, and it's like a meditation. Once you're in the rhythm, you can close your eyes and just let your hands work. If you don't know anything about music or rhythm or drums, you can just keep a beat and that's good enough."

Kim Botello, the director of education at the Maria Mitchell Associ- CIRCLE, PAGE [4B](#)



Gary Langley, left, and Mark Palmer play drums at Stone Beach Tuesday night. The men lead an informal drum circle that meets most Tuesdays at various locations around the island. All are welcome.

Photo by Nicole Harnishfeger

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ation, found out about the group in 2014, when a group of MMA summer interns asked her to come with them to a session. She made it out to Children's Beach, where they were meeting, and picked up a drum. She said she had no idea what she was doing.

"I just think it's fun," she said. "It's relaxing, you don't have to think about it too hard, and for some, it's easier than for others. I didn't have any experience drumming. I'm OK at following beats, but I'll never be able to start my own beat. We have these jams and we just get creative."

The drums are mostly Palmer's. Larger djembes and congas line the back of the bench above Stones Beach. Smaller hand-shakers and bongos are in front, available for children who want to join in.

Over the past few years, Palmer has also brought in a four-foot Australian pipe called a didgeridoo that has a low-pitched tone. In several instances, people have brought other instruments, from a bagpipe to a flute. On a nice night, when Palmer thinks there might be a lot of participants, he brings a salad bowl and a wooden stick for people to play.

"Our whole idea is to have fun," he said. "It's not a competition. It's never us saying, 'you should practice'."

But keeping a drum circle alive for seven years is not easy, Langley added.

"Some nights, we would draw up to 30 people, and now some nights we can get as low as six people," he said. "There have been peaks and valleys. Sometimes we show up there and it's just the two of us and it's frustrating."

Palmer's drum collection grew from a couple of bongos to dozens of congas and djembes after a series of Grateful Dead shows in the early 1980s. It was at those shows that he first saw groups of people, some intoxicated, sitting in drum circles, banging on whatever drum or pan was in front of them.

"Nobody knew what they were doing, or maybe one guy did. But they were clearly just banging away and having a good time," Palmer said. "I picked up a drum, was immersed in its sound, and you don't even have to be a musician to do it. Every circle is an experimental music session."

Last month, Palmer and Langley brought their drums to Bartlett's Ocean View Farm to play under a tent outside the Nantucket Yoga Festival. Several years ago, they played on stage at Cisco Brewers, inviting people to join them. There was no set list, and they made no money playing.

Drumming is something that should not be taken seriously, he said.

"You have some people, and not all of them speak the same language, some of them could be enemies, you could have old ladies and Vietnamese gang members in a circle with drums, and suddenly you have them doing something fun," Palmer said.

"I don't consider myself spiritual, but this is my alternative for religion and it has been since the 1980s. This is creating something beautiful where people have to rely on each other. You have a diversity of experience and background. You try to accept people and bring them in."



From left: Craig McNeer, Gary Langley and Mark Palmer form a small drum circle at Stone's Beach on the south shore Tuesday. The circle meets weekly throughout the year.

Photo by Nicole Harnishfeger