

The Inspiring Journey of Wilbur Sargunaraj

Wilbur Sargunaraj's journey in music began in the most intimate of settings — his family home. Born on Treaty 7 Territory in rural Alberta and raised in India, Wilbur's upbringing was steeped in the rhythms and melodies of everyday life.

"I grew up in a musical family where my parents were involved in church music," said Sargunaraj. "Dad would play the accordion or Casio keyboard; mom would sing along, and I would accompany them on the guitar or use my dad's accordion box as a percussion instrument!"

These early experiences were formative, not just in shaping Sargunaraj's musical abilities but also in instilling in him an understanding of music's power to comfort, encourage, and bring joy to others. "As a young boy, music was always part of our day-to-day life in India," he said, "and when I saw how it was used to comfort, encourage, and make a difference, I knew I found my calling."

Sargunaraj's formal journey into music education began in the late 1990s when he graduated from the music program at Grant MacEwan University in Edmonton. His quest for knowledge didn't stop there; he continued his education privately in cities around the world, including New York, Havana, Los Angeles, Bogotá, and India. This global perspective enriched his understanding of world music while inspiring a passion for music education.

After spending a decade as a private drum instructor, Sargunaraj began to see the potential of combining music education with Cultural Intelligence (CQ) – the ability to function effectively in culturally diverse situations. This led him to develop what he calls "Edutainment," a unique blend of education and entertainment where music plays a central role in conveying important messages about cultural understanding and diversity.

"There is a strong emphasis on using music as a tool to convey my message," Sargunaraj explained. "Part of my work is visiting local and international schools and organizations where I offer fun, interactive events and workshops on Cultural Intelligence. Despite being a speaker and consultant, music has always been an integral part of my work in bringing people together."

Sargunaraj said that CQ is not just an academic concept but also a vital tool for fostering understanding and reconciliation in today's increasingly globalized world. It also helps build relationships across cultural divides.

"CQ enables us to embrace cultural similarities and differences as we learn and take steps to engage with our perceived 'other,'" Sargunaraj said. "I see a great need for CQ across Canada and here in Saskatchewan, where there needs to be a greater understanding

between Settlers and First Nations. We can talk all we want about reconciliation, but until we take active steps to enter into the world of our perceived 'other' and form relationships, I am afraid we won't see change."

"Music is an incredible way to cross barriers! I have seen how music can be used as a beautiful and natural way to start a conversation when words fail," he said.

"Young students are so impressionable, and we need to give them a head start in appreciating diversity by introducing them to different cultures and traditions through music," he said. "I believe that this is a step to encourage understanding and respect for different cultures."

Sargunraj has seen firsthand the impact that music education can have on students' lives. One of his most memorable experiences was a project he undertook with SMEA in Uranium City, a small community in northern Saskatchewan. Working with a local school of only seven students, he led a project where the students learned to play percussion instruments, recorded an original song, and filmed a music video titled "Uranium City."

"This project was about much more than music; it was about building relationships and learning from others," he said. "The students were thrilled to have an artist visit their remote town and spend time with them, not just teaching music but also playing basketball, introducing them to cricket, and sharing a meal at a community potluck. In turn I was thrilled to be welcomed into their community and learn from them!"

As we celebrate Music Education Day, Sargunraj's story reminds us of the transformative power of music and the vital role that music educators play in society. His work demonstrates that music education is not just about developing technical skills but about building bridges between people, fostering understanding, and creating spaces where everyone feels valued. `