



Prepped & Polished, LLC
21 Eliot Street
South Natick, MA 01760

Announcer: Talkshoe: Recorded Live.

Alexis: Hello. Thanks for joining us for the Prepped and Polished radio show. I'm your host Alexis Avila; licensed guidance counselor, private tutor, and founder of Prepped and Polished, LLC, tutoring and test prep in beautiful South Natick, Massachusetts. The Prepped and Polished radio show is your educational insider. Our show is brought to you by Prepped and Polished, LLC; where I'm the principle educator. To learn more about our firm, please visit PreppedAndPolished.com. Thank you to everyone who's listening to the program. We appreciate you taking interest into the info we provide to families and educators around the globe. For future shows, updates, and ongoing relevant education news, please join our Facebook community by searching for Prepped and Polished and clicking like. You can also find us on Twitter [@preppedpolished](https://twitter.com/preppedpolished).

Joining our show today is Sandra Riscala. Sandra is cofounder of Plugged In, a Needham, Massachusetts-based nonprofit music program whose focus is to give young people a venue through which they can channel their creativity, learn to work in a group, improve their music skills, while learning about the value and importance of social activism. Sandra has a degree in film and television from Premerson College. She has produced her own documentaries, as well as worked in the postproduction department of Nova and WGBH public television. We're delighted to have Sandra on our show; she's going to share with us her experiences bringing young people together through Plugged In and her overall successes improving a child's self-confidence and social consciousness through music.

Before we start, I just want to make sure our listeners have our contact info. Our email is radio@preppedandpolished.com. If you'd like to submit a question at any time, you can use that email address. Often, our listeners will have questions as they're listening in, or afterwards, so we always appreciate hearing from you. You can email us at anytime, at radio@preppedandpolished.com.



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Sandra, are you on the line?

Sandra: Yes, I am. Hello?

Alexis: How are you doing today?

Sandra: I'm good. How are you?

Alexis: I'm doing well. Thank you. Thanks so much for joining us.

Sandra: You're welcome.

Alexis: Sandra, I see that you and I were both film majors in college. What was the last really good movie you've seen?

Sandra: 'Searching for Sugarman'.

Alexis: Did that come out recently?

Sandra: It came out in the summer and I was wanting to see it. Life was crazy, and I never got a chance to. Then a couple weeks ago, I went to the wonderful Coolidge Cornered cinema in Brookline. It's a beautiful movie, I loved it. I don't know. Do you know about it?

Alexis: No. I think I've heard of it, but I'm a little out of the loop. I have to get back into film.

Sandra: It's a music . . . it's about a musician. It's a documentary, but it's an amazing story. Very [inaudible: 03:22] . . .

Alexis: Wow. That sounds . . .

Sandra: . . . inspiring, yeah.



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Alexis: Thanks for the tip. I appreciate that.

Sandra: No problem.

Alexis: Can you start off by telling us about what is Plugged In, and how you came up with your program?

Sandra: Yes. Plugged In a nonprofit teen rock band program. What we do is we put kids in bands. We group them by their age, their skill level, their musical interest, their personality, and their availability. They meet once a week with a teacher, with their band for 1½ hours. Each session lasts about 13 or 14 weeks. At the end of each session, they have a concert. Their final concert is a concert that raises money for one charitable organization or cause that's chosen by the student.

At the beginning of the term, we have an evening called Community Engage, when the students get together, they pitch different causes that are important to them, and talk about the work they do and why they believe that we should raise money for them. Then at the end of the evening, the kids vote and they determine what they're going to raise money for. Our program is really putting the emphasis on using music to help others and on compassion to others and themselves, and away from ego, stardom, and competition.

Alexis: What's an example of one of the charity organizations that the kids decided to go with?

Sandra: Let's see. We had a bunch of different ones. We've had one for the Aspergers Association of New England, had one for the Cystic Fibrosis Foundation. We've had one for We Care Solar. We've had Amnesty International. We've had the [inaudible: 05:00] Fund. We've had all different local and international ones. It's really exciting because this is really, very [inaudible: 05:09], that it's determined by the kids. We don't take input from parents; we don't put our own input in. For every term, we don't know where the kids are going to take us, what people are going to need, and what things we're going to learn about around the world.



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One of the things we do too, is we get a lot of suggestions; sometimes 20 suggestions from the kids. After every Community Engage, we send an email out to our entire mailing list with all the suggestions, with links to the websites of the organizations. Then at the concert, we have all of them listed on the program, because we may not be raising money for all of them, but we want to let the kids feel that their suggestion is at least bringing awareness to their organization that's important to them in our community.

Alexis: Wow. That's great. That teaches them a lesson to not . . . just because there's one winner, it doesn't mean that everybody can't be a part of it somehow.

Sandra: Absolutely. Yep.

Alexis: You talked a little bit about how you separate students into different levels. I was just wondering, do you need to have a music background or a natural music talent to be a part of Plugged In?

Sandra: Not at all. We have a number of students who have come with very, very little experience. We are not an organization that is putting a lot of pressure on the kids to be perfect; that's not the goal. The goal is really to be a team player, to gain confidence, to make a difference in the world with something that you love, like music. We have kids of all abilities. We have some kids with disabilities. We have different functioning; all different types of people. All the differences are transcended because all the kids love music.

We find that really putting the emphasis on compassion really ends up having a transformative effect, not only on the atmosphere of Plugged In, but on the kids themselves. Because I think what happens is they become more open, just open-hearted and they make stronger connections with each other, and they also feel more safe to take risks, musically. I think the result is increased confidence, connection to the community, and they feel empowered that they are making a difference in the world. Really, it's a very beautiful thing to watch and be part of.

Alexis: Wow. That's great. When did Plugged In start? What are some of the changes you've seen since the beginning to now?



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Sandra: I think . . . my husband, Tom and I, he is an engineer at WGBH and a musician; we started the program in 2002. We just had an idea. I had some friends that had a theatre program and we were actually on the beach in [inaudible: 08:12], and the idea came popped into my head to do this. Tom and I had never had a business or anything; we've never done anything like this before. We basically just hung up flyers. The first band we had, had 5 students in it. I think one of the really wonderful things about Plugged In is that we are learning along with our students. I always say to our students that we're all perfectly imperfect, that we aren't a glossy machine. We're learning as we go along with our students. It's been an amazing experience.

We've really gone out into the community and taken a lot of workshops on nonprofit management and board development. We're very connected to the nonprofit community around us; any chance that we can to learn, to connect with people, to get help. We take the message that we give to our students, and we use it with ourselves, which is that we try to the right thing, to get it right, but if we don't get it right, we try again. It's really proven to be really successful and the kids feel very . . . there's be a lot of positive reinforcement from the community, from the schools, principals, guidance counselors, the Youth Commission. We basically have had a number, number, number of people tell us that our program saved their child's life or they've [inaudible: 09:40].

Alexis: Wow.

Sandra: A lot of times, the kids who are gifted in music or interested in music . . . not all of them, but some, may not be naturally doing well in school, academically or sports and they fall through the cracks, and there's nowhere for them to get acknowledgement in the community. We pick these kids who may really have been losing self-esteem and self-confidence in school. They come to Plugged In, and it's a place for them to express the gift that they have, to be acknowledged in the community, many community performances that we are invited to and perform at. It helps them to feel really confident. I think it ends up . . . there are some kids who are easy with academics, but even for the ones that aren't, once their confidence grows, I think that that starts to have a positive effect on their academics, as well.



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Alexis: That really resonates with me, because I grew up in Needham. In the 90's, if you didn't play sports, you went to the mall.

Sandra: Yep.

Alexis: I could just definitely see the benefits of having another program that really helps empower kids, like a Plugged In. That's just awesome.

Sandra: One of our students, he said, "In Plugged In, I found my people," which I find sums it up as sweet. They're very grateful; they are very protective of Plugged In. The kids really try hard to do the right thing, to make it as good as it can be. They are so kind to each other, supportive, and loving. The big kids help the little kids. The little kids . . . we have kids as young as 8 and 9, and when they're on stage, all the big kids are in front cheering them on. It's really beautiful. It's almost . . . sometimes in high school it's not cool to be kind; you have to put the hard shell around. In Plugged In, we're trying to teach that strength comes from kindness, and the more you open up your heart, the stronger you are; it's not a sign of weakness. I think the kids get that at Plugged In. They really feel safe being the true kind person they are.

Alexis: Wow. That's powerful. For our listeners outside of Massachusetts, are there programs that you know of like Plugged In outside of the Massachusetts area?

Sandra: Are you asking me?

Alexis: Yeah, because I have no idea. I'm just saying if you're in New Hampshire. I don't know. Have you . . . do you know?

Sandra: Yeah. There are definitely rock band programs all over. I would think that, from what I know, there aren't many that involve the philanthropic charitable part of it.

Alexis: Okay.

Sandra: For us, we find that that is the most important part of our program.



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Alexis: Yeah, because you do a lot with charities and giving back. I'm not sure if our listeners know this, but my younger brother, Nicholas, is a Plugged In alumni.

Sandra: And a teacher.

Alexis: And a teacher at Plugged In. Nick's currently touring in a successful metal band called Power Glove. Have you noticed a little or a lot of former Plugged In kids taking their music to the next level?

Sandra: Yeah. We have a number of students from the early days who have come back, who have went to Berkeley College of Music or in the music profession, and come back and teaching. Being 10-years-old, we don't have a huge alumni group, but there are those who are pursuing . . . One thing that we do know is many, many, many have taken the philanthropic part into and integrated into part of their lives, whether in college or in their careers. We hear back from kids a lot, that that's something that they will take with them forever. It's part of who they are now.

Alexis: Absolutely. What are your future plans for Plugged In, going into the [inaudible: 14:06] and beyond?

Sandra: We just moved to a new location . . .

Alexis: Wow.

Sandra: . . . which is very exciting for us. It's probably, at least double the size. Now we can offer private lessons and we'll have a recording studio. On a short-term, we're really working to build those programs and strengthen the infrastructure to sustain that type of growth. Long-term, we have some very . . . we want to do our summer camp more. Then we have some ideas of . . . we have a lot of people that we've met along the years in different parts of the world who run team youth music programs. One of the ideas we have is having some program where we take kids to these different countries and meet up with other people who are using music for positive change, and have a cross-cultural program. That's a long-term, far-reaching one, but an exciting one.



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Alexis: Yeah. You got to dream big.

Sandra: Yes, we do. We have a list of goals. The ones that are a short-term, realistic, and then we have the long ones. You keep moving forward on both columns. We also want to figure out short-term, more ways for the kids to be involved in the charities that they choose. We want to have more programming for older students, 11 to 12th grade, and maybe have them give lessons to younger students or students who can't afford private lessons. We have a lot of ideas.

Alexis: That's fantastic. You guys also have an amazing website. I was looking through it. I'm a big website guy, so I just love the logo and the fun buttons. You learn about what Plugged In is by the website.

Sandra: Yeah. I'll have to put a plug-in for the Boston University Center for Digital Imaging Arts, in Waltham. They have a program, called the Practicum Program, where nonprofits apply, and then the students choose which nonprofit they want to work with. We got our website designed free from this program. It's an amazing website. We've had some promotional videos done by them. If anyone out there's looking for the nonprofits, wants to apply to the BUCDIA, you should definitely look them up.

Alexis: Yeah, I'm in. I'm looking at this website. They're the real deal.

Sandra: It is.

Alexis: Are there any upcoming concerts, in case I don't have any plans or our listeners would like to attend one of these Plugged In events?

Sandra: Yes. We have a couple fundraisers coming up for Plugged In. We have one on November 9th, in Needham, where a band called [inaudible: 16:46], a very cool band, is performing. The bass player there is a former teacher of ours. Trying to think of some upcoming . . . our end-of-session concert is in January, the weekend of Martin Luther King. We have a couple of other performances, I think in Needham. When they light the tree in Needham, our students are going to be performing there. You can see it all on our website. I can't remember the dates.



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Alexis: Perfect. That sounds awesome. Thank you so much, Sandra. I really appreciate you coming on and taking time to educate us on Plugged In. Thank you.

Sandra: Thank you, as well. We love your organization. I think you're doing great work, and we love having Nick teaching at Plugged In. He's doing a great job.

Alexis: Good. All right.

Sandra: All right. Thanks, Alexis.

Alexis: You're welcome.

Sandra: All right. Bye.

Alexis: Talk to you soon.

Sandra: All right. Bye-bye.

Alexis: This wraps up our show today, with Sandra Riscala of Plugged In. Please visit PluggedInBand.com to learn more about Sandra's music program. If you care about the longevity of student music empowerment programs such as Plugged In, I highly suggest making a donation on their site, as well. Thank you for joining us on The Prepped and Polished radio show.