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Teacher by day, rocker by night

RICH FREEDMAN/Times-Herald staff writer



Mellissa Harley teaches fifth grade at Mary Farmar Elementary School in Benicia. At night she performs with 'House of Floyd,' a Pink Floyd tribute band. Photos: J.L. Sousa/Times-Herald

Call it "School of Rock, Part II." This, however, is real-life. And Mellissa Harley - unlike Jack Black's lying-about-teaching character in the popular 2003 motion picture - is an honest-to-goodness day-time instructor, night-time rocker.

And the girl is having a blast.

Harley, a 1984 Ygnacio Valley High School graduate, landed the back-up singer job with "House of Floyd," a Pink Floyd tribute band that includes the Benicia instructor and fellow Benicians Mark and Sheri Showalter and Vallejo's Lou Portela.

And, wouldn't you know it, the faux-Floyd band plays Hayley Horn Auditorium on the Benicia High School campus Saturday, about a three-minute walk from Mary Farmar Elementary where Harley teaches fourth and fifth grade.

Which means, of course, a core of staff and teachers will be on hand to hear Harley belt out, ironically, "We don't need no education" from the famed "The Wall" album. "I want them to be there," Harley said. "But I don't know if I want to know they're there. They can talk to me afterwards."

Those who know Harley aren't stunned at the sudden part-time job she landed in June. Others, however, may be scratching their textbooks.

"It's unexpected for a lot of them," Harley said. "For the ones who know me, it doesn't surprise them."

Though the former teacher at the closed Mills Elementary in Benicia loves her "real" job, it's been her quest for years to join a rock band. Fortunately, she's a big "Pink Floyd" fan.

"It doesn't 100 percent surprise me," she said. "It's a nice full circle. Someone introduced me to the music in high school back in 1983 or '84. 'The Wall' was the album at the time. Good stuff."

Harley, 40, saw the real Pink Floyd live twice in the late 1980s.

"It's music I've loved for a long time," she said.

With three "House of Floyd" gigs to her credit, including last weekend's Ojai Rock Festival in front of 2,000 fans, Harley is psyched for the Benicia show.

"I'm so thrilled," she said. "I have a lot of folks excited who are coming to see me." Harley's known the Showalter's since Mills when the couple had a daughter at the school. When a back-up singer was needed to complement Sheri's vocals, the sax-playing Mark Showalter sought Harley.

"We had already been friends with her and her family for a few years and I had done a performance with her previously," Mark Showalter said. "So I knew she had the talent. Plus, she loves Pink Floyd and she's just fun to be with."

"Blending with others is an important part of it," Harley said. "Sheri and I started singing together and we immediately recognized our voices blended perfectly. For a singer, that's magic."

Harley got her first glimpse of "House of Floyd" when the band played "Summertime at the Maritime" at the California Maritime Academy last year.

"They're unbelievable musicians," Harley said. "It blew me away."

Though "House of Floyd" only books itself a few Saturdays a month, it's still time away, Harley said, adding that she wouldn't have taken the role without the blessings of her husband, Rich, and their two children.

"The schedule was going to impact the family," she said. "So I asked permission. They've all been so supportive."

Harley, as the youngest "House of Floyd" member, said she could do the gig "for a few years. Mark tells me, 'Don't quit.' It's fun to be here."

"House of Floyd" isn't the real deal, but they're darn close, Harley said.

"I don't think any true Pink Floyd fan would walk away not thinking it was a pretty true version," she said. "It's very close."

If you go

What: 'House of Floyd,' a Pink Floyd tribute band

When: Sat., Aug. 25, 7:30 p.m.

Where: Hayley Horn Auditorium, Benicia High School, 1101 Military West

Tickets: \$15

Contact: (707) 534-2277