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## Playing tribute

By Nancy Shohet West

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If you see the Doctor Doom Orchestra in performance any time soon, you might notice that one of the band members is a bit older than the others.

While most of the group — which releases its first CD, “Off the Ground,” on Friday — are in their late 20s, Dan Fassett is more than twice their age. The 61-year-old Groton contractor and youth worker only recently started performing on stage, and took a most unusual path to get there.

Music has long been part of his life, Fassett said.

A genuine hippie who rode the rails and lived on a commune, Fassett said, he collected money for a free health clinic in San Francisco in the early 1970s, and learned to play the harmonica as he stood on Telegraph Hill waiting for donations. In later years he took up the fiddle as well, he said.

But after settling in Groton in 1977, he focused more on work and family, establishing a career, volunteering at his church, and raising two children.

Then tragedy struck, twice. Their elder child, a daughter named Wreath, died over a decade ago in a car accident. And their son, Darby, died of a heroin overdose in May 2008 while a journalism student at University of Massachusetts Amherst.

Though friends, professionals, and spiritual advisers offered Fassett and his wife, Lyssa, solace in varying degrees, Fassett said, it was with the members of the Doctor Doom Orchestra — which at the time went by the name Doctors of Flight — that he first felt surrounded by comforting memories of Darby.

His son was not a musician himself, Fassett explained, but the band included several young people who had known Darby or friends of his at UMass.

Seeking a way to cope with his son’s death, Fassett contacted some of the band members just to see whether he could spend time with them. They urged him to come to a practice session, thinking it would be merely therapeutic.

But after sitting in on a couple of sessions, Fassett brought along his fiddle and then his harmonica, and band manager Peter Hantzis decided that Fassett could offer the group something unique.

“Our music is really a fusion,” said Hantzis, who is also a lead vocalist for the group.

“In terms of genre, we combine reggae, hip-hop, a little bit of funk and soul, and also folk, which is the element Dan brings in. We have a rock drummer, a funk bassist, a guitarist whose style is usually alternative, a trumpet bringing in classical elements, and then Dan providing the folk influence with his fiddle and harmonica.”

The music would eventually lead the Fassetts to something beyond a way to cope emotionally with their loss.

In the fall of 2009, the band helped organize a benefit concert in Amherst called “Be the One” to raise awareness of student substance abuse, and to raise money for the university’s prevention efforts. Last fall marked the second annual “Be the One” benefit.

The name “Be the One” cuts to the core of what the Fassetts came to believe after learning of their son’s heroin overdose: Plenty of people knew of Darby’s drug use, but no one shared that information with his parents.

“His friends knew, their parents knew, they all knew, but no one said anything to us,” Fasset said.

“We didn’t live with him. We had a strong relationship with him and talked to him routinely, but designer drugs are made not to be detectable. He was in school, had a good job at Whole Foods, everything seemed like it should.

“We saw him a week before he died. He had come home and spent time with us. I said a couple of times to him during that visit that he didn’t look well, but he said he was being treated for an infection. He had a reasonable explanation,” he said.

Among those who helped Fasset and the band put together the first benefit concert were professionals in the University Health Services department at UMass.

Badly shaken by three overdose deaths in the spring of 2008, the campus was grasping for a way to address the problem.

The outreach didn’t end there. Fasset’s wife, who he said was too dispirited to get out of bed for weeks following Darby’s death, finally sought counseling from Aileen Dashurova, who runs the Healing Embrace Vitality Works practice with offices in Westford, Bedford and Nantucket.

Through Dashurova, Lyssa began to believe that Darby was sending her messages, one of which was to find a man named Ken Powers in Lowell.

Together, the couple tracked down Powers and learned that he was the executive director of Lowell House, a human services agency dedicated to providing addiction and HIV counseling and treatment programs. They began working with him on outreach efforts for drug users.

“The more I got to know Darby, the more I thought we had to name our harm reduction and youth intervention programs after the man,” Powers said, citing the powerful bond that developed without ever meeting him. Like the Fassetts, Powers believes that Darby’s spirit directed the three adults to come into contact.

Powers brought a critical skill to the collaboration: He knew how to apply for grant funding. His grant applications eventually resulted in two new programs.

First, he received \$50,000 to create the Darby Drop-In Center, which operates at Lowell House six evenings a week.

“The thrust of the program is risk reduction and prevention,” Fasset said. “This is a place where drug users can walk in, have access to services, talk to people.”

Powers then obtained a \$10,000 grant to design a program for high school students. Called the Darby Fasset Project, it will provide funding for outreach workers to meet with groups at area high schools.

Fassett's hope is to take the program to Darby's alma mater, Groton-Dunstable Regional High.

So while the counseling center and other outreach efforts are giving the Fassetts the opportunity to prevent other young people from dying the way their son did, the band provides Dan with an artistic outlet — even though the music isn't necessarily a huge hit with others his age.

“Most of my peers have a hard time with the music I play with the Doctor Doom Orchestra, but I love it.

“Just the fact that they let me play with them is astounding, but I understand the music. I see how it all fits together. It's a very high-energy group. I can jump around on stage all the time and they don't care,” Fassett said.

“If you do that with people that are older, they tend to think you're a little out of control. You're not really supposed to be that physical at my age.”

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