



From left

**Marc Sandroff,**  
Co-Founder, Lead Guitar

**Brad Richter**  
Co-Founder, Lead Guitar



# Music Takes the Lead

## Tucson Nonprofit Expands Music Education Across the Nation

By Eva Halvax

At a guitar workshop in Page, Arizona in 1999, guitarist Brad Richter was struck not only by the musical talent of a young group of Diné students, but by their dedication to teach themselves music in the absence of resources in their school.

Richter continued to work with the school in Page and four years later, Richter met Marc Sandroff a guitar player, businessman and philanthropist who credits the roots of his career success to the discipline he learned studying music as a kid.

Together, the two founded Lead Guitar, a nonprofit organization in Tucson that provides guitar classes to students in schools that are systemically underfunded and neglected. Lead Guitar seeks to use music as a tool to increase rates of school attendance and graduation, as well as encourage Lead Guitar students to continue school beyond their high school graduation.

Five million American children do not have access to music education, according to Lead Guitar. It is well researched that music education is closely correlated to improved student performance in areas of study such as math and science, according to the organization.

“What I learned in music still serves me years later. The guitar captured me, and it got me passionate about my studies,” said Sandroff. “One of the things that we do here is help kids realize their own potential. Our goal is to use music as a tool to keep kids in school and believe in themselves.”

By serving schools in which 80% or more of the students are eligible for free or reduced lunch, Lead Guitar focuses on communities that have the least access to arts education.

“While we use classical technique and focus on music fundamentals, like note reading and following a conductor, we’re doing it by playing (genres

like) folk and rock. We want students to be exposed to every kind of music. We want students to see themselves in the material they’re learning, and the composers and artists that we put in front of them,” Richter said.

Lead Guitar was founded in Tucson and was supported early on by a number of Tucson philanthropic organizations and businesses including: Diamond Family Philanthropic Fund, The David and Lura Lovell Foundation, Community Finance Corporation, Pueblo Mechanical and Sunland Asphalt. Today, Lead Guitar serves students in five states throughout the country and is well-positioned to be a national organization. This year, Lead Guitar will serve more than 90 schools and will work with more than 30,000 students.

“Lead Guitar’s success grew out of a cooperative effort from early supporters

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Tucson Regional Director Alfredo Vazquez with students at Morgan Maxwell School in Tucson, early 2020; 2017 Wellness Through the Arts Grand Prize Awardee, Ismael Mercado of Hollinger K-8 in Tucson, performs his original song at the University of Arizona.





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– Marc Sandroff  
Co-Founder  
Lead Guitar

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in Tucson,” noted Sandroff, Lead Guitar’s co-founder and president of its board of directors. “We still have a loyal group of supporters here in Tucson and their support enables us to grow throughout the country. Today, we have support from donors nationally ranging from the National Endowment for the Arts to music industry groups like the Guitar Salon International Foundation and Augustine Foundation. We owe our success to the support and encouragement of many organizations and individuals in Tucson.”

When the pandemic hit in 2020, Lead Guitar was faced with the immense challenge of adaptability. Yet, it was this moment that allowed Lead Guitar’s mission to thrive virtually – a lasting change within the program.

By creating an advanced digital curriculum, students were able to maintain their music studies, even without access to an instrument. Out of 68 schools, 63 were able to continue their programs with Lead Guitar. The digital program is a valuable tool that is creating a student community beyond each individual school. It links students, schools and teachers throughout the country. This now enables Lead Guitar to serve schools and students outside of its core service areas and support its national ambition.

“Part of our mission is sustainability. And we want schools to be able to continue doing this program independently after a couple of years of co-teaching with us. We’ll always be there for them if they want us to continue working directly with their students, but we want them to take what we’ve offered and make it their own. I think that the online learning system really helped with that piece of our mission,” Richter said.

Lead Guitar is a local success story, an organization that grew out of Tucson and is on its way to be recognized nationally.

**Biz**