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RETAIL

KENNY'S MUSIC | BY MARTHA SPIZZIRI

ROCKING THE HOUSE

Stop by Kenny's Music in Dana Point, Calif., and you'll likely find a group of strangers sitting outside jamming in the West Coast sun, within sight of the ocean. They'll be near the guitar-playing mermaid sculpted (with a chainsaw) by former Runaways singer Cherie Currie.

The relaxed atmosphere created by owners Kenny "Big Daddy" Williams and his wife, Kimberly, has been a big factor in helping the store reach its 20th anniversary this year — no small achievement any place, but especially in the store's highly competitive area.

The vibe has also helped put Kenny's Music on NAMM's Top 100 Dealers list each of the past three years.

But it took time for the shop to become that successful. In fact, when Kenny started out, the guitarist and producer was giving lessons from his home until his then-girlfriend suggested he find another place to teach.

He rented office space, then decided to start selling product. Though he "knew nothing about retail," he said, he had one advantage. "I started in 1993, when things were a lot cheaper, relatively speak-



Kimberly and Kenny Williams

ing." And competition wasn't as fierce then, he noted. He was able to get exclusive local rights to sell certain brands.

Even so, the retail side of the business took a long time to establish itself. But it did grow, and it really took off five or six years ago when he moved down the street to a busy corner. Kimberly quit her job to work in the shop, a move that turned out to be quite serendipitous. "She turned out to be the face of Kenny's Music. She's really got

great rapport with customers. I'm better with the teaching," Williams said.

GETTING — AND GIVING — DEALS

Williams' strategy is simple: Offer quality instruments at the best price. The shop doesn't sell B-stock instruments, except for trade-ins, but Williams prices his A-stock merchandise as close as possible to other outlets' B-stock prices. He said vendors are often willing to give him good deals, because they appreciate

his commitment to quality.

"They know that you're making their product look good, because your image is better than some of these bigger stores," Williams said.

Lessons remain a strong part of the business. Kenny's Music offers private classes in just about every instrument — guitar and other strings, piano and keyboards, drums, woodwinds, brass, harmonica — plus vocals. There are about a dozen instructors, plus Williams. (Some instructors

teach several instruments.)

Williams' strict hiring criteria include knowledge of music theory. "Even the drum teacher has to be able to read music. And they have to show me that they have worked in the industry at a high professional level," he said. (The roster includes Ray Weston, a drummer with Wishbone Ash; jazz saxophonist Greg Vail; and Martin Gerschwitz, Iron Butterfly's current vocalist and keyboard player.) "That tells me that they have accomplished what they're trying to get [students] to accomplish. And they've got to be good with kids."

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Also a significant contributor to the shop's success is the packed schedule of events and activities Williams maintains.

"We put on an open-mike jam twice a month at a nearby club," Williams said. A mix of people perform, including professional musicians and Kenny's Music students.

The city of Dana Point calls on Kenny's Music to put on concerts, partly thanks to Williams' music-industry connections. "I can get acts down here that they normally wouldn't be able to get. And usually, since they're friends, they'll do for a good, reasonable price," Williams notes.

Another big event: a summer band camp for kids. For \$350, the kids are kept busy for six weeks. They form bands, rehearse with a teacher, and at the end of the summer perform live at the same club that hosts the open-mike night. They also visit the Grammy Museum and

go into a studio to record a CD.

This year Williams took on another activity: DJ'ing at a local radio station. That's increased the store's visibility, and helped Williams make even more connections. "I'm going to have Buddy Guy on my show. I had Rod Piazza last week. I've had Guitar Shorty on there, too," he noted.

SOCIAL ACTIVITY

All these events give Kenny's Music plenty of content to post online — and they follow through effectively. The shop uses Facebook, Twitter and email to publicize upcoming events. Kimberly takes photos at the events, which are posted on the shop's active Facebook page. (Facebook posts are also displayed on every page of KennysMusicStore.com.) Williams

turns his radio shows into podcasts and posts a link whenever a new episode is available.

"[Social media] is huge, because we can communicate with people who are already friends of ours. I use my personal Facebook friends, and my wife's, to notify everybody [about] whatever special event we're doing," Williams said. He also posts on the page for Kenny "Big Daddy" Williams and Lexi G, his band with his stepdaughter — so that's four outlets on Facebook alone.

But what Williams really appreciates are the in-person relationships with customers — kept through good times and bad. "It makes you appreciate life more," he said. "That's what music's all about. I think Nietzsche put it the best way. He said 'Without music, life would be a mistake,' and I totally believe that." **MI**



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