

'For Once in My Life' Makes Music Out of Disability

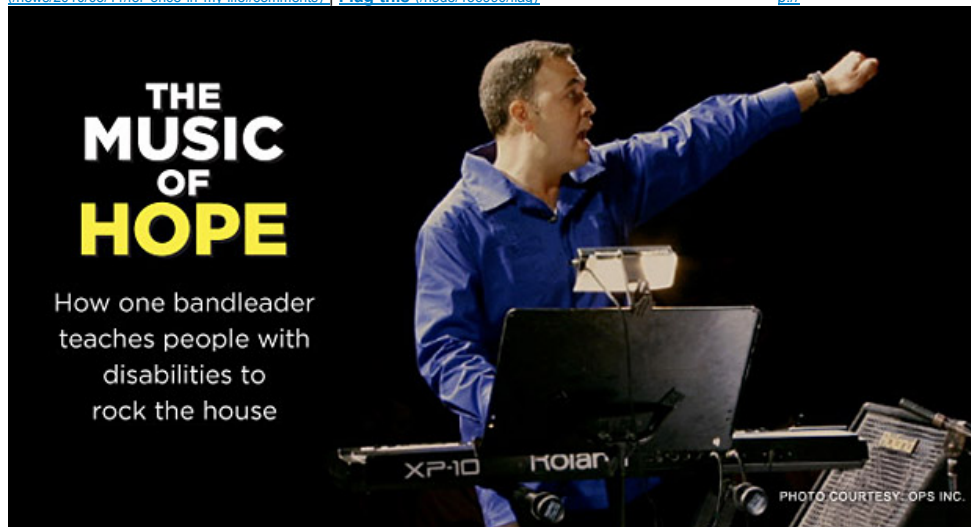
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Javier Pena never saw himself working with people with disabilities, let alone leading a 25-member band whose members struggle with Down's syndrome, cerebral palsy, autism and blindness.

But Pena is a gentle soul with an easy surrender to what he considers divine will. So in 1996, as a new Venezuelan immigrant with only a tentative grasp of English, he took a chance. Pena accepted a nominally paid job as music director for the disabled employees of [Goodwill Industries of South Florida](#) (<http://www.goodwillsouthflorida.org/>) in Miami.

That leap of faith led Pena to what looks a lot like his true calling.

Pena turned a largely symbolic position—to help socialize disabled folks with music—into a life-changing experience. Now his band, known as the Spirit of Goodwill, is a group of legitimate performers, complete with a blues-belted lead singer, a well-trained choir, a horn section, keyboards, guitar, and drums. They're sought-after entertainers who perform regularly around Florida.



Photo: Courtesy OPS Inc.

And they're budding celebrities too. A new documentary about the band, [For Once in My Life](#) (<http://www.4onceinmylife.com/home.html>), won the audience award in March at the South By Southwest Film Festival in Austin, as well as awards from festivals in Nashville, Tennessee; Sarasota, Florida; and Sonoma, California.

"They're continuing to grow," says the film's co-director, Jim Bigham, of the band. "Now that they're getting recognition, they're taking the next step."

It all started with Pena, 40, a religious man whose parents taught him early on that, "Each individual was created in the image of God."

Pena works full time in TV production for CRM Media in Ft. Lauderdale, Florida, which produces programs for churches and Christian networks. After hours, he's a dedicated bandleader who doubles as a teacher, a coach, a disciplinarian, and, to some, a father figure.

"He's the type of person that not only will hear your problem, but if he can do anything about it, he will try," says Terry, the band's lead singer, who is blind. "He's always there for you. He's an honorable fellow."

"There is an ongoing relationship beyond the music room," says Pena in a call from his home in Ft. Lauderdale. "That has been a natural process...I think I want to cover all these areas because if they don't feel good emotionally, that affects their performance."



Photo: Courtesy OPS Inc.

Pena is ambitious for his band. In the film, he gives his musicians just weeks to master Gloria Estefan's percussion-heavy hit *Conga* for a climactic performance at Adrienne Arsht Performing Arts Center in Miami for the U.S. Mayor's Convention in 2008. Normally, they'd have months to rehearse it.

But Pena has learned over the years that his group can exceed everyone's expectations if given half a chance. He's been nudging them to the next step since his first months on the job. Back then, Pena knew that—disabilities or not—his group could do more than the annual Christmas concert, their only performance of the year.

So he started collecting donated instruments—a drum kit here, a guitar and horns there—with the goal of putting together a real band that could tackle complex arrangements.



Photo: Courtesy OPS Inc.

It took six months to teach the group its first song. But that was enough to build their confidence. In 1997, the Spirit of Goodwill won a regional talent show for people with disabilities, beating 15 other acts. "That's when we really began to take it seriously," says Pena.

Pena eventually hired a brass instructor to teach—from scratch—the new trombone and horn players in the group. They expected it would take 18 months before the horn section was proficient. "In less than six months, the guys picked it up because they were

so enthusiastic," says Pena. Next, he hired a voice coach.

"The population is so diverse, including the disabilities, the ethnicities, the background, the mental levels," says Pena. "They have been the ones who have taught us how to teach them. Some of them like to read music and were very methodical. Godwin [the keyboardist who is autistic] wanted me to show him short portions of a song, and then he removed my hand and did it. For others, it's more like repetition."

Co-directors Bigham and Mark Moorman spent every day for two years with the band. They developed the trust essential to capturing an intimate look at the ways the music and Pena influenced band members' lives. Many of the musicians had suffered emotional trauma that complicated life with their disabilities. Several had been abandoned or ostracized by their families and lived sink-or-swim existences with relatives or single parents.



Terry's father left him after accidentally dropping him as a baby, causing his blindness. Drummer Sam's mother left him in the hospital with a raft of health problems, all caused by her attempts to hide her



Photo: Courtesy OPS Inc.

pregnancy. Keyboard player Christian's father abandoned him and his mother because he was ashamed of his son's autism.

Despite the group's emotional, mental and physical hurdles, Pena is a stable, compassionate figure in their lives and has given them the gift of competency.

"Once you have a disability, people just tell you you're not going to amount to nothing," Terry says in the film. "For me to take the bull by the horns, with the talent God has given me, in a way, I can say I am the one who has had the last laugh."

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