

Karate Teacher Rocks



The boys in Manhattan Youth’s Martial Arts class in New York City want to be just like their teacher; and the girls want the boys to be like him too. Their teacher, James Clifford, is also the bass player in The Energy, a pop/rock band.

Every Friday afternoon, The Energy gets ready to spend the weekend traveling to perform in cities all along the East Coast. The band just released a new album, and has already made two others. They have been an opening act for bands such as Vertical Horizon, Fastball and the Click Five.

Between his band’s busy tour schedule and full-time job teaching music at Bay Ridge Preparatory School, Clifford still makes time to commute into Lower Manhattan every Monday and Wednesday to teach Manhattan Youth’s Martial Arts after-school programs.

Clifford may be a born-and-bred Brooklyn boy, but his heart has always been in Lower Manhattan. He took the train from Bay Ridge every weekend to play football in Battery Park, and remembers spending most of his free time around Chambers and Greenwich Streets, hanging out with friends and frequenting his favorite diner.

“When I began teaching, I’d go to Gee Whiz, the diner, on my breaks between classes to have a cup of tea,” he said.

But Clifford's favorite Downtown destination was always J&R, a music store where he stopped in every Tuesday to buy new music as he walked from P.S. 89 to Southbridge Towers.

Clifford first began going to classes in the neighborhood when he was eight years old. His uncle, Manhattan Youth Martial Arts Program Director Dr. Charlie Fasano, brought him to his very first karate class.

When Clifford turned 17, Bob Townley, Director at Manhattan Youth, hired him as a martial arts instructor. He went on to become the program's Assistant Director.

"Bob took a chance and gave me a lot of responsibility at a very young age," said Clifford. "It made me feel confident."

Clifford played bass and guitar throughout high school, where several of his music teachers played in bands outside of school. After seeing it was possible to become a teacher while still pursuing dreams of musical stardom, he joined the Bay Ridge Prep faculty, along with two fellow band members.

He has since spent over a decade showing students that even though he's a member of a popular band, he's also grounded.

In fact, he said, it's his students who help keep it that way.

"The industry is an emotional roller coaster. The kids I teach are so innocent and real," said Clifford. "They keep me grounded and help me take a step back."

Fellow band member Adam Wolfsdorf said teaching karate has kept Clifford "rooted," because the kids are exciting, original and haven't been "turned off" the way many adults have.

"We've toured with some pretty huge artists who think the world should revolve around them," said Wolfsdorf. "But we know that we're part of a whole. It's like you're Clark Kent during the day and Superman at night. We're living two lives, but those two lives are yin and yang, and you need both."

Clifford said his teaching gigs provide him with a sense of balance that most other successful artists don't have, noting that many groups quick to make it big are also quick to fall apart. In order to maintain this balance, he must establish a clear set of boundaries in the classroom.

“The kids see that we have lives, that we aren’t just boring teachers, so they want to know more about what happens on the road,” said Clifford. “But we don’t actually tell them. We usually just give ’em a funny answer.”

Students often go to their teachers’ shows with their parents, who are grateful for the opportunity to go and do something with their kids.

When a student, who was an aspiring musician, expressed some doubts about becoming a musician, the band let her perform at one of their shows.

Clifford still receives phone calls from students who have graduated and gone on to pursue careers in music, who thank him for their success, his encouragement and leadership by example.

Clifford believes it is important to show his students that with hard work and ambition, anything is possible.

Dean Bevilacqua, Clifford’s mentor and fellow teacher at Bay Ridge prep, says that he is just plain great with kids.

“He’s a pied piper. If you see him at the school or on Field Day, all the little kids gather around him like little geese,” said Bevilacqua.

Bevilacqua has always been a brother-figure to Clifford and began bringing him to shows when he was just nine years old. Clifford now opens for bands they went to see perform years ago.

The Energy’s sound is heavily influenced by early 1990s rock, and ideas for songs come to Clifford in snippets, which he hands off to Wolfsdorf to shape into lyrics. Of the 2,000 CDs lining the walls of his room are bands like R.E.M. and Radiohead, which Clifford values for their ability to make listeners feel like they are part of a whole.

He makes a strong distinction between this music and his favorite “ear candy,” bands like Weezer and All Time Low.

Clifford met the band’s vocalist, Adam Wolfsdorf, in the Manhattan Youth Martial Arts program back in 2000, and the two began attending open-mic nights together.

Soon, more musicians joined in, and an early '90s cover band was formed, playing local bars in Bay Ridge for two years. Clifford and Wolfsdorf wanted to start writing original tunes, and sought out a permanent drummer and guitar player in 2005. By early 2006, The Energy became regulars at Clifford's home away from home, Tribeca's Knitting Factory.

The band, whose other two permanent members include Ian VanderMuelen on guitar and Chris Flanigan on drums, has yet to sign with an actual label, but continues to run their own "mini-label."

They work closely with Wavelength Entertainment and renowned industry publicist Tracey Miller; and their manager, Beth Bogdan, is Senior Director of Artist Relations at Universal. Their booking agency, Supreme Entertainment Artists, is based out of Boston, and represents bands like Maroon 5 and Eve 6. Since all four band members work full-time, it took almost a year of traveling to Boston and back, every weekend, to cut the new album.

Clifford has no plans to give up either of his teaching jobs, and will soon be adding yet another responsibility to the list.

"I have an 18-month-old girl, Rafaela, and when she doesn't think I'm cool anymore, I'm gonna call on him to take her to concerts—like I did for him," said Bevilacqua. "He's already said he's got it covered."

Name: _____ Date: _____

1. Who is the subject of this passage?

- A James Clifford, a musician and teacher of music and martial arts.
- B Dr. Charlie Fasano, the Manhattan Youth Martial Arts Program Director.
- C Adam Wolfsdorf, a member of The Energy, a pop/rock band.
- D Dean Bevilacqua, Clifford's mentor and teacher at Bay Ridge Prep.

2. This passage describes the sequences of events in the life of James Clifford.

Which of the following is part of this sequence of events?

- A Dr. Charlie Fasano brought James Clifford to his very first karate class.
- B Clifford met Adam Wolfsdorf at Bay Ridge Preparatory School.
- C James Clifford became a teacher at Manhattan Youth Martial Arts with two fellow band members.
- D James Clifford and Adam Wolfsdorf quit their jobs to tour with The Energy.

3. Clifford went to karate with his uncle, saw rock shows with his mentor, and attended high school with teachers who performed in bands. Later, he decided to work as a karate teacher and a music teacher while touring with his own band. Based on this evidence, what conclusion can be made?

- A Clifford has always known he wanted to become a karate-fighting champion.
- B Clifford has learned that to be successful, you have to focus on just one thing.
- C Clifford is planning to leave his friends and family behind for a life of rock stardom.
- D Clifford's career choices have been shaped by many important mentors in his life.

4. Clifford believes that he benefits from working with his students. What statement does he make to support this conclusion?

- A "The industry is an emotional roller coaster."
- B "They keep me grounded and help me take a step back."
- C "They want to know more about what happens on the road."
- D "We usually just give 'em a funny answer."

5. What is this passage mainly about?

- A the story of The Energy, a pop/rock band in New York City
- B a man who balances his interests in teaching and music
- C the importance of mentoring for young boys in Bay Ridge
- D the process of becoming a professional martial arts fighter

6. Read the following sentence: "If you see him at the school or on Field Day, all the little kids gather around him like little geese," said Bevilacqua."

What does Bevilacqua seem to be saying about Clifford by comparing the kids who gather round him to geese?

- A That Clifford is teased by his students, who call him names.
- B That Clifford is popular with his students, who like to be near him.
- C That Clifford feels pity for his students, who ask him for food.
- D That Clifford is annoyed by his students, who are loud and crazy.

7. Choose the answer that best completes the sentences below.

All four band members work full-time. _____, it took almost a year of traveling to Boston and back, every weekend, to cut the new album.

- A Consequently
- B On the contrary
- C Particularly
- D Otherwise

8. As a teacher and musician, Clifford provides encouragement to students who are interested in music. What evidence from the text supports this conclusion?

9. Describe Clifford's current schedule. When does he teach? When does he play music?

10. At the end of the story, we learn that "Clifford has no plans to give up either of his teaching jobs." Why do you think he has made this decision? Use evidence from the text to support your answer.

Teacher Guide & Answers

Passage Reading Level: Lexile 1200

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Suggested answer: When a student, who was an aspiring musician, expressed some doubts about becoming a musician, the band let her perform at one of their shows. Clifford still receives phone calls from students who have graduated and gone on to pursue careers in music, who thank him for their success, his encouragement and leadership by example.

9. Describe Clifford’s current schedule. When does he teach? When does he play music?

Suggested answer: Answers may vary, but students should understand that he teaches at Bay Ridge Prep full-time, teaches martial arts after school, and spends the weekends recording albums or touring.

10. At the end of the story, we learn that “Clifford has no plans to give up either of his teaching jobs.” Why do you think he has made this decision? Use evidence from the text to support your answer.

Suggested answer: Students may recall that Clifford benefits from his time with his students, and has a positive impact in their lives. He says they make him feel “grounded,” and his mentor says they like him. His bandmates appear to support and respect the role that teaching plays in his life, and the band has succeeded despite all members having full-time jobs. They might also say that Clifford seems to be following the example set by his mentors, who took time out of their schedules to teach and mentor him, and is therefore likely to do the same.