

Capital Gazette

Interview with an enigma: Rock star Storm Large visits Indian Creek class

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Performer Storm Large of Pink Martini, right, plays and sings with Indian Creek students, from left Reese Fortier, Lena Warner, and Kendyl Underwood. (Joshua McKerrow / The Capital)

Storm Large could give high school students a great lecture.

The singer struggled with mental illness, drug use, homelessness, her sexuality and more, as she details in her memoir “Crazy Enough.” But her visit to Indian Creek Upper School on Monday was the opposite of a lecture.

Instead, the Pink Martini lead singer sat down with *Jimmy Monack’s Advanced Placement Language* class and simply had a conversation.

Large is one of Monack’s yearly “enigmas.” These are usually his favorite musicians — Mike Patton, Andy Partridge and Prince to name a few — whose works he can have the class dissect before delving into more tedious readings like Walt Whitman or Henry David Thoreau.

One of those exercises in January was to write a letter to Large detailing what they admired about her and her work and asking for advice. After receiving those letters and learning her gig was canceled in Maryland this week, Large stopped by to respond in person.

Instead of warning the teens about the dangers of sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll, she gave them a lesson on being their most authentic selves.

As juniors Reese Fortier and Kendyl Underwood interviewed Large and moderated her discussion with the class in the school's auditorium, Large told them about insecurities she struggled with growing up and how they led her to find her voice.

"I could always sing but never thought it mattered," Large told the class.

"I wasn't skinny. I wasn't pretty. I wasn't cool. I didn't have any hookups anywhere. I was just really lonely. So when I realized I could sing and an entire club of people went bananas at the one song I did, I realized I could get free beer, I can have friends, something to do, people will clap and be like, 'I love you!' Who doesn't want that? Sadly, it sounds so shallow but it's that simple."

Large sang with heavy rock and punk bands in the late 1980s and early 1990s, but after picking up gigs as a "ghost singer" imitating famous artists of other genres for demos, she began to branch out with her voice. This led her to be a contestant on the television show "Rock Star: Supernova" and join the multi-genre orchestra group Pink Martini as a lead singer.

"I would scream and I would yell and I would try to sound hard like my punk rock heroes, and I could do it, but I always had this big, bawdy theater voice also," Large said. "I started performing differently as I got older and started trusting my natural voice and writing to that voice. I found that it was not only good for my voice in general but it was fun. It was easier to tell a story with my ballad voice than with my badass voice."

In the 90 minutes they spent together, the lines between grown-up and teenager blurred. Large talked to the students as if they were adults, not censoring any of her stories or her language. An interview between a class and a rock star became a discussion among friends.

She told them about growing up with a mentally ill mother, watching a friend die of cancer, running away and becoming homeless. She broke out her ukulele and performed a duet of The Beatles' "Blackbird" with junior Lena Warner. She asked about their hopes and fears for the future and listened to the students talk about what it's like to be on the cusp of adulthood in today's world.

She didn't pander to them, even when it could have been easy to. Large turned the simple question asking what it's like to be a woman in the music industry into a lesson on complex feminism.

"Full disclosure: I have fake boobs," she told the class. "Well, they're not fake, they're mine. But they're standing on little waterbeds so they can see better."

Large told the class she gets criticized by fans for changing her look in a way they think panders to the male gaze.

“I don’t see myself as part of the problem necessarily because I am representing myself as I want. And I will fight for anyone’s rights to represent themselves,” Large said. “Whether I’m playing into some harmful norm, I don’t know ... If I’m not hurting you and I’m using whatever I have to promote the common good, then suck it.”

With prompting from her teacher, junior Zara DuBoyce talked to Large about distinguishing hurtful criticism from constructive criticism as a dancer, but didn’t ask the other question from her letter to Large: “I was wondering if you had advice for teenagers who are trying to accept themselves? I believe this is a question that all teens secretly ask themselves.”

Julia Mead asked a similar question in her letter: “How did you manage to deal with the stress of your teen years?”

After Large’s visit, Mead said she left feeling like if Large could succeed, she could, too.

“She had a really rough childhood, but she ended up here talking to us about what it was like. She made it really far in life despite what happened,” Mead said.

Mead said she looks forward to analyzing more of Large’s work in class.

“We’ve been doing it for so long, I think we all feel attached to her in some way,” Mead said.

DuBoyce said she left school that day feeling more confident. She plans to look for more of the answers to her questions in Large’s book.

“It seemed like it’s a constant struggle to try and accept yourself. You just have to trust yourself and find yourself and eventually you’ll be content with yourself,” DuBoyce said. “She was successful because she was content with her music career and her journey. I feel like that’s what it’s about. Finding what you’re meant to do.”



Selene San Felice

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