



By [Dave Bakke](#)

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## Dave Bakke: Music teacher to student: 'Uke' can do it

Dave Kinzer and his student, Brandon Lee, go over some ukulele chords. Kinzer built a device he found online that helps Brandon play the ukulele with his foot. The State Journal-Register/Dave Bakke

As spring break neared for students at Ball Charter School in Springfield, music teacher Dave Kinzer faced a situation. When class

resumed April 4 after the break, his students would be issued ukuleles. One of his students, Brandon Lee, probably would have to sit out.

"I have a condition," says Brandon, 13. "The doctors thought I maybe had a stroke when I was being born, so I don't have full use of my arm."

The disability is in Brandon's left arm and fingers, which he would be using to make chords on the ukulele's fret board. Mr. Kinzer told Brandon that when classes resumed, he could arrange for Brandon to take a different class. To his credit, Brandon said no. He wanted to stay in music class.

Kinzer knew there had to be a solution to this problem somewhere, some way. He went online and eventually found "[In Bed By Ten](#)," a website for ukulele players. It includes directions on how to build The Ukulele Strum Buddy, The One Handed Uke Strummer. From the website: "The Ukulele Strum Buddy is designed to allow individuals who are limited to the use of one arm, to strum the ukulele by controlling the strumming with their foot or knee."

That sounded exactly like what Kinzer needed. It is the invention of Tavit Smith, a ukulele instructor in Florida, and his friend, Don Pillsbury, an

engineer. "My idea," wrote Smith, "was to design a device that could be temporarily attached to a ukulele so that it can be strummed by using a foot (or knee) while chords would be formed with either the left or the right hand.

"The requirements were that the device should be simple and easily field repairable. The manufacturing costs were not to exceed \$6 OR could be made in a third-world country using locally available materials. Also the device had to be removable and able to be fitted to all sizes of standard ukuleles."

Kinzer downloaded the instructions. He called Brandon's parents to get their permission to go ahead and build one for Brandon; they agreed. By the time spring break was over, it was done. When the ukuleles were passed out to the students, Brandon got his with the rest of them.

He says he had tried playing his stepdad's electric bass once, "just to see if I could do it." But that was not too successful. But this time? Victory. "I told him everybody would be in the same boat," says Kinzer. "None of the others had ever played a ukulele to my knowledge, so they were all starting out the same."

Kinzer re-strung ukuleles for Brandon and the left-handers in the class. The device Brandon uses works with a long string that has a loop at the end. The loop goes around Brandon's foot. A pick is secured above the strings with a binder clip attached to a lever device. When Brandon pumps his foot up and down, the pick strums the strings. He holds the ukulele stable with his disabled left hand and uses his good right hand to make the chords.

"It worked out well," says Kinzer. "My goal was that he could play the same songs and chords as everyone else." And so he does. So far, that includes a couple of Beatle songs and one each by Credence Clearwater Revival, John Lennon, OK Go and Boney M. (Psst, Brandon, want to impress Mr. Kinzer with some extra credit work? Check it out: "Tiptoe Through The Tulips" Tiny Tim. YouTube. You're welcome!)

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