

The Stringers lift holiday spirits with Project Self-Sufficiency

By DIANA TUORTO

SPARTA — For the third year in a row, guitarist Ryan Opiekun played for Project Self-Sufficiency's annual Christmas gathering for agency participants and their children.

This year, Ryan, 15, was joined by the other members of his band, The Stringers, playing a mix of bluegrass, rock, folk music and Christmas carols to an enthusiastic crowd on Dec. 6 at Sussex County Technical School. The party was catered by a former Project Self-Sufficiency client and her children.

Ryan plays the guitar and mandolin and sings lead vocals. The other band members include vocalist Taylor McCourt, drummer and saxophonist Brian Cornish, bassist Paraic O'Reilly and congo player Tyler McBride.

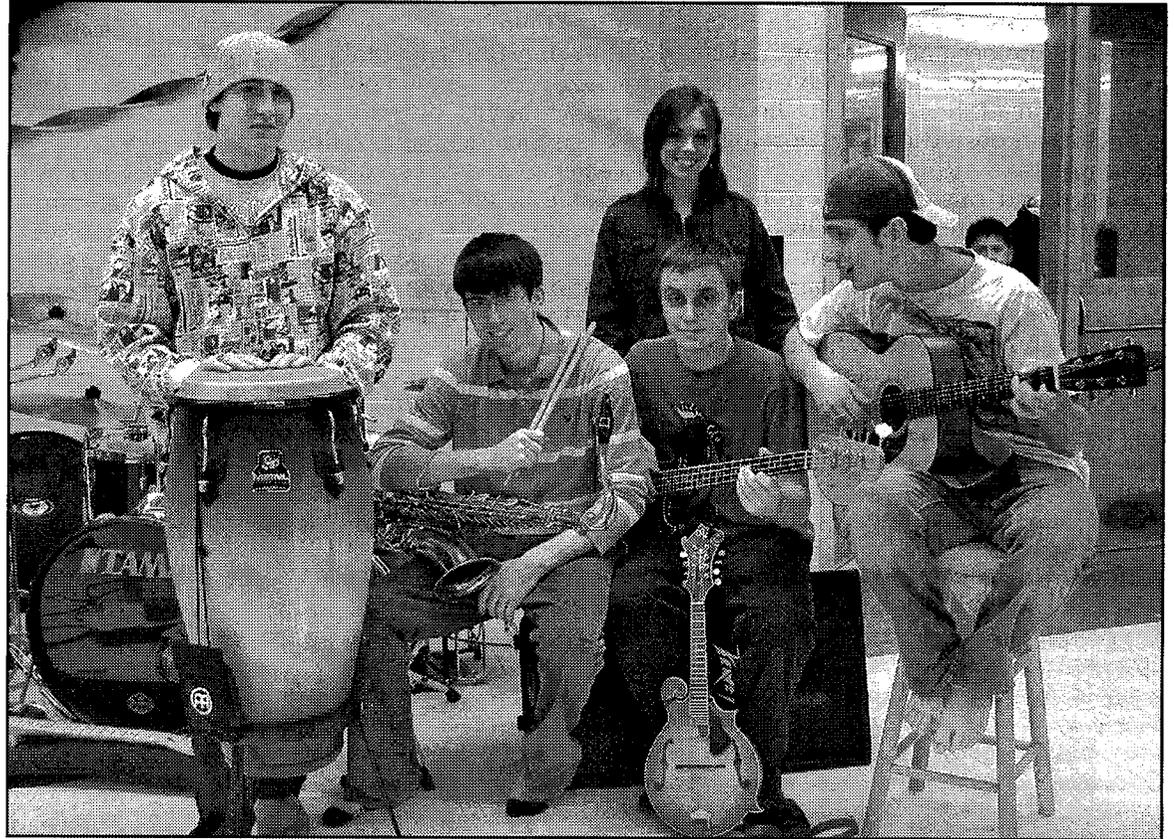
"Ryan and his band are an extremely talented group," noted Deborah Berry-Toon, executive director of Project Self-Sufficiency. "We are delighted that he has agreed to play at our Christmas party year after year. It has been a pleasure watching him mature as an artist, and the band is a huge hit with our clients and their children."

Performing for Project Self-Sufficiency is something that comes naturally to Ryan and his band. "We performed a lot of songs that the kids could sing along with. We had a great time doing something that's down to earth and gives something back."

The band's unique sound makes it a popular attraction at local cafes in northwestern New Jersey. Since the band members range in age from 14 to 17, they cannot play in local bars without parental permission, but they are regular performers at the Gristmill Café in Andover.

During live performances, The Stringers perform both their original songs and covers. Ryan cites Neal Young, Jackson Browne and The Grateful Dead among his musical influences. "As a band, we play a lot more 60's through 90's rock," explains Ryan. "We pretty much skip the 80's altogether. We all pull from different musical backgrounds. We're a bunch of laid-back people who love what we do."

Project Self-Sufficiency is a community-based non-profit organization which provides a comprehensive network of training and support services, enabling displaced homemakers to achieve economic self-sufficiency. A handful of the services they offer include women's health awareness, education and job training, child



abuse and neglect prevention services, housing assistance and counseling. Project Self-Sufficiency also operates Little Sprouts Day Care Center, an on-site child care center that accepts children from six weeks to six years old.

For more information on Project Self-Sufficiency, contact Deborah Berry-Toon at (973) 383-5129 or pss@garden.net. The organization is always in need of generous volunteers and donations.

To contact Ryan and The Stringers, please e-mail rjorjo11@yahoo.com. The band is constantly on the lookout for new venues where it can perform and showcase its talents.