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Music program provides culture of encouragement

MYCincinnati uses instruments, orchestra to transform young lives

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EAST PRICE HILL — When 22-year-old Eddy Kwon steps into place before the group of young musicians, 15 pair of eyes suddenly lock onto his hands as they begin to rise. It is the universal signal that all musicians, regardless of age or expertise, understand:



Laura Jeckel, left, teaches an after school music program at Roberts Academy in East Price Hill. Jeckel, a classically trained cellist with international teaching experience, partnered with a non-profit organization, Price Hill Will, to form MYCincinnati, a free after-school music program that offers students in Price Hill the opportunity to study an instrument and play in an orchestra. The ultimate goal is to use classical music as a tool for transforming the lives of children and their families. The idea, is inspired by Venezuela's national youth orchestra program, El Sistema. / The Enquirer/Gary Landers

Time to perform.

Backs quickly straighten and violins, violas and cellos are positioned to play. And then something extraordinary happens.

The tune, "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star," is a common first piece, but the sound coming from this ensemble of 7-12-year-olds is most uncommon. They've only had their instruments for about seven weeks -- and playing with bows for less than three -- so the rich, full musical sound they're producing is amazing. The moms and dads gathered in the hallway of Seton High School can sense it and gasps

and squeals of delight can be heard as they witness the second public performance of the city's newest orchestra, MYCincinnati.

The children of Price Hill don't catch a lot of breaks, especially the young ones. The thought of having a violin or cello and studying with some of the city's best musicians would have been as likely when the year started as a week's vacation at Disney World.

That changed this summer when an accomplished young cellist from Boston, Laura Jekel, partnered with a non-profit community development organization, Price Hill Will, to form MYCincinnati, a free after-school music program that offers students in Price Hill the opportunity to study an instrument and play in an orchestra.

The ultimate goal? To use classical music as a tool for building community and transforming the lives of children and their families.

The idea is inspired by Venezuela's national youth orchestra program, *El Sistema*. Founded in 1975 by Venezuelan economist and composer Jose Antonio Abreu, the program has spawned hundreds of orchestras, choirs, and music centers throughout Venezuela and created thousands of amazing young musicians in more than 30 countries, including Gustavo Dudamel, the 31-year-old conductor of the Los Angeles Philharmonic.

The program, featured on "60 Minutes" in 2008, reached this country in 2009. It arrived in Cincinnati earlier this year when Jekel, one of 10 people who trained last year at the New England Conservatory to develop El Sistema-inspired programs in the U.S., chose Cincinnati as her destination.

Jekel points out that musical excellence, though a primary goal, is really a means to a far more important end.

"I want the kids to feel good about themselves and know that they can succeed," she says. In the process, they'll absorb lessons on discipline, responsibility and learn that working hard can be fun.

Clearly, she's on to something.

Teaching method makes difference

It's a few minutes before 4 p.m. on a very chilly afternoon in early December. Although buses are rapidly filling with students outside Roberts Paideia Academy in East Price Hill, members of MYCincinnati stay behind, joined by students from three other Price Hill elementary schools who are dropped off by parents.

Even though they have been in school all day, they run down the hall toward a large classroom with an enthusiasm that is surprising, given the fact that they'll spend the next two hours rehearsing and receiving the kind of musical training normally reserved for much older children.

They do it every day, Monday through Friday, and the smiles and laughter bouncing off the walls make it clear that they are here by choice.

So what is the secret? A method of learning to play an instrument that is very different from the way most Americans learn.

"In this country, practicing, especially when you are young and just beginning, is a very solitary activity," Jekel explains. "For many kids, it gets frustrating very fast."

Parents have to force kids to practice, and both parties frequently give up after a year or two. Playing in an orchestra is reserved for those who stick with it until high school.

"I have 15 kids begging me to take their instruments home so they can practice," Jekel says, "but it's because they are having a totally different kind of musical experience."

The difference: Each young musician is constantly part of a group making music, and the group progresses faster than the individual would on his or her own. It's a familiar concept to anyone who's ever been part of a sports team, but one seldom paired with learning to play a musical instrument

"From day two when they first held their instruments, they were sitting in an orchestra plucking one string," Jekel says. Granted, in this program, an orchestra is the term applied to any ensemble, but the results are impressive regardless of size. The collective sound quickly becomes musically strong and something everyone can feel good about.

The kids' sense of accomplishment also comes from private lessons with Jekel, Kwon (a violinist who graduated from the College-Conservatory of Music in June), CCM students and graduates who volunteer and two retired Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra members, violinist Larrie Howard and bassist/composer Frank Proto. Lessons in music history and reading music are delivered with snacks and a sense of fun, usually with the young musicians and teacher sitting cross-legged on the floor, clapping and singing rhythm patterns.

On this afternoon, visiting guest artist, bassoonist Liz Schurgin in from Boston for three days, plays a few bars of a Mozart concerto, then pulls apart the sections of her instrument as the kids gather round for a close look. She even plays a few bars of "The Sorcerer's Apprentice," which one of the older boys

immediately recognizes as the music Mickey Mouse conducted in “Fantasia” when he worked all those bucket-carrying brooms into a frenzy.

LeDante Catlin, 8, who plays viola, carefully holds onto the bottom of Schurgin’s bassoon when she invites him to feel how heavy it is. He joined the program after his mother picked up a flier that Jekel dropped off at his school.

“We wanted to get him involved in something besides sports,” says his father, Antony Catlin. “He loves coming here, and it’s definitely helped him be more patient and focused.”

LeDante’s assessment speaks to one of music’s intangible benefits. “It calms me down when I play,” he says.

When asked about the progress the young musicians of MYCincinnati will likely experience over the next six months, Kwon refuses to speculate. “I can’t even begin to imagine, considering how well several of the kids are playing after only two months,” he says.

Jekel envisions a time, eight years from now, when the youngest members will be the veterans encouraging a new crop of 7-year-olds.

Of course, any talk of the future brings up the topic of funding. In just a few months, Jekel managed to get the financial support from a few generous individuals to get the program running. She’s also connected with a number of supporters like Jerry Witkowski of A Violin Maker’s Workshop, who provides all the instruments free of charge.

Still, increasing interest and financial support are key to MYCincinnati’s future. Jekel says the kids are the best proof that the program is changing lives.

“I have been blown away by how fast they are progressing and how confident they’re becoming,” she says, adding, “and how happy they are to be here every day.”