

Speech to the Arts Council of the National Endowment for the Arts

March 27, 2009

9:00 a.m. meeting

Chairman Patrice Walker-Powell

Speech by Ava Spece, Executive Director, DC Youth Orchestra Program

“My daughter has been on the honor roll ever since she joined the [DC Youth Orchestra] Program.” This is what a parent told me about her fifth grade daughter.

My name is Ava Spece and I am the Executive Director of the DC Youth Orchestra Program and I am honored to be with you today. The students you have heard perform this morning are in the upper levels of our training program and are just 7 of the 600 students who participate annually. Their coach and mentor is Shy-Luen Chen, one of our 37 invaluable and dedicated faculty members.

Our program has been providing music for young people, ages 4 ½ on up, from beginning to advanced levels, since 1960. Very few of our students come from affluent households and most of them are DC residents. Many of them attend schools with limited music education resources. Music is a field that is often dominated by those who have been given the best private instruction, at the best institutions, with the best musical instruments available, and in general our students do not have these advantages. In the last three years, 25% of the students in the program received scholarships or heavily subsidized tuition discounts. Even those who pay full tuition are paying an amount substantially lower than other area orchestra programs and much lower than the going rate for private instruction – and the DC Youth Orchestra Program offers 17 times the number of classes that other area youth orchestra programs offer. Without our funders and donors, the program would simply not survive. In addition to our regular program, we also have multiple outreach projects in area schools and at Department of Parks and Recreation facilities, offering free classes to students in DC and helping children to make productive use of after-school time. Music does have the power to bring academic success to children who might not otherwise find it. As almost every educational association, from the National Education Association to the National Parent Teacher Association, has said, “...education in the arts provides significant cognitive benefits and bolsters academic achievement.” If any of you doubt this, let me tell you that in the last

four years 100% of the students who graduated from the DCYOP also graduated from high school. By contrast, according to *Education Week*, the graduation rate in DC Public Schools was 57.6% while and the national average is 70.6%.

Listen to what another parent said. “I bring my children to the DC Youth Orchestra Program, not because it’s cheaper, but because the education and training they receive is better than that in other programs.”

Parents bring their children to classes on Saturdays and Tuesdays. They walk through a littered parking lot to a building that is sometimes locked. They walk through hallways marred with graffiti, onto a stage with tattered curtains and poor lighting--in short, through a facility in disrepair. They use bathrooms that are unclean and sometimes find their classroom doors closed to them. They rent our well-used instruments and carry them proudly to class, where there are some of the finest, most dedicated teachers waiting. We are keenly aware that the greatness of a music teacher is not measured by his ability to conduct an orchestra of the best and the brightest students, but by his ability to galvanize a group of average and diverse students, challenge them to work as a team, and lead them to a sense of accomplishment, success, and music-making. Our teachers do that every week. We try to ignore the problems of the facility because we have long known that the most important space we work in lies between our teachers and our young musicians.

Here is what an alumna once said. “Had it not been for the DC Youth Orchestra Program, I would not be alive today.”

At the DCYOP we have found that music can help young people surmount the barriers in life. Most music organizations do not conform to any one demographic; nor do they have a political identification. Indeed, when listening to great music on the radio, it is impossible to determine the age, race, or socioeconomic status of the musicians. Children are invited to join our program, regardless of their musical ability or financial means. Thus I have seen all kinds of children walk down the hallways before and after rehearsals--5-year olds and college freshmen; children of public dignitaries and children on food stamps; red, yellow, black and white, arm in arm, laughing, talking and making music together. We have seen our children perform for Presidents, First Ladies, Mayors, Council members, WNBA fans, and Ambassadors. We have seen our children perform abroad and at home, at the Kennedy Center and in Southeast DC, in concert halls, at the White House, in theaters, at train stations, on sidewalks, and in public schools. They have been honored by the President's Committee on the Arts and the Humanities, the National Endowments for the Arts and the Humanities, the Institute of

Museum and Library Services, the U. S. Department of Education, the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, the Catalogue for Philanthropy, the Mayor of Washington DC, and the Washington Post. Music is truly an equalizer.

Children find success through the DC Youth Orchestra Program. Every child needs a place where they feel important, a place where they can achieve something and a place where they know they belong. For some children that may be in math class, for others it is on the athletic field, but for many...it's a music class! Our alumni successes include Grammy and Emmy winners, National Symphony Orchestra musicians, university music department heads, world-class conductors, and a host of music educators – all contributing substantially to the music industry. The greater proof of our success, however, is the alumni who have found accomplishment outside of music: politicians, novelists, judges, teachers, businessmen, doctors, attorneys and homemakers.

Music has the power to change lives and the social fabric of our community. Our program provides ensemble-based music training to students, regardless of their socioeconomic status, their playing--or paying--ability. Our young musicians start learning musical instruments even if they have no prior experience and the program leads them through a multi-tiered curriculum that culminates in one of our 9 major ensembles. If they go farther, that is wonderful! Indeed, we have seen tremendous musical successes from our students, but more often--and perhaps more satisfying--are the successes outside of music. And that is just fine for us. The DCYOP experience has helped to make strong, self-reliant and productive citizens of those who might not have otherwise succeeded. The DC Youth Orchestra Program, without the impressive financial resources or physical facilities of other organizations, has been quietly providing opportunities to DC's young people for almost 50 years!

Our mission statement is simple - Music for young people; achievement for life!

Madame Chairman, thank you for allowing us the opportunity to play before you today.