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The program gives local minority youth access to classical music

Youth Orchestra introduces kids to the classics

By: Jason J. Clark/Contributing Writer

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As the bow glided across the strings of the cello, the vibrations produced the sounds of a piece written by Johan Sebastian Bach. With his eyes closed and body moving in rhythm, 13-year-old Cole Randolph concentrated on his technique as he extracted the melody from his instrument.

Charlie Powers, an accomplished cellist himself, as a member of the United States Marine Band called The President's Own, was surprised at the young, slim cellist.

"He was very focused," said Powers. "There were a lot of distractions, people walking in and out and camera flashes but that didn't distort his melody."

Randolph has been playing since age 5. He is a member of the DC Youth Orchestra Program. He started playing because his parents wanted him to, but he has come to enjoy playing the cello. "I like the program because it keeps you on track with your instrument," said Randolph.

The DC Youth Orchestra Program recently held a music open house at Coolidge High School in Ward 4. The program featured an "instrument petting zoo," master classes in brass and string instruments, and a youth audition for students vying for ensemble training. With a unique structure and curriculum, the program challenges students by placing them in age- and ability-appropriate classes.

"It allows them to feel important," said Ava Spece, executive director for the program. "It gives them a place to belong and succeed in their endeavors."

Housed at the high school, distinctive melodies pierce through the school's hallways from time to time. On one side of the hallway 10-year-old Jasmine Parham was plucking the strings of a harp that's bigger than she is.

"I've been playing the piano for three years," she said. "I think going to the harp would be an easy transition."

Her father, Lawrence Parham, right by her side, is a big fan of youth being involved with music. Along with

his wife, who is a classically trained pianist, the Parhams made sure all three of their children are musically involved. Their children play a variety of instruments, including the saxophone, clarinet, flute, and violin.

"Playing helps them with their discipline, studying, and math," Lawrence Parham said. "It also shows them that if they practice something, they will get better which, is a personal philosophy of mine."

Over 600 children participate in the DC Youth Orchestra Program, making it the largest youth orchestra in the Washington area. They range in age from 4 to 19, and 65 percent are African American. The program also boasts a high graduation rate with 100% of its seniors getting their high school diploma.

Although only about 1,500 of alumni have continued careers in music, Executive Director Spece emphasizes that this number not to be looked down upon.

"The others go on to become great mothers, doctors, lawyers and great contributing members of their community," said Spece. "Whatever they do music will always have a place in their lives."

A little girl named Kayla, who is one of the younger members at 4 years old, was jumping and dancing in the hallway saying she could play the violin. She was given a violin 1/16 which is about 8 inches long, a standard is 14 inches, and she proceeded to strum away.

"It's all about the 5 year old who walks onto stage in their patent leather shoes and puts bow to string," said Spece. "Cameras flashing, pictures, applause - that sense of accomplishment is irreplaceable."

The students participate in classes in addition to their ensemble rehearsals and concerts. There they learn the background of their instrument, as well as fundamentals of music. Alison Martin who also started playing the violin at age 5 is now 16. She can now play music by ear whether she was listening to the radio or some other source.

Martin also started playing because her parents wanted her; but she, too, has found her own love for the instrument. She also says playing has helped her develop a love for all music.

"I appreciate music," she said. "I hear a lot of people who only listen to lyrics but I actually listen to the music as well."

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