

IN THE SPIRIT

Music Haven

Tunes in to New Haven's Neediest Kids


by AMY J. BARRY / photography by NICK CAITO



Noel Mitchell, Music Haven violin student.



Mandi Jackson, Music Haven executive director, and Gregory Tompkins, violin teacher and member of Haven String Quartet, look at a chart of all the lessons and classes taught in the new Erector Square location.



A little over a decade ago, Music Haven was founded on the premise that all New Haven children, no matter their financial circumstances, should be given the opportunity to play an instrument. Founders also wanted the teachers to be full-time faculty and professional, performing musicians; and wanted students to be able to remain in the program from grade school through high school.

Today, Music Haven is fulfilling those goals, while growing exponentially. What began with about 20 students in a tuition-free afterschool program in two of the city's most struggling schools, has grown to nearly 80 students being taught by members of a string quartet – in a beautiful, newly renovated 6,700-square-foot facility, divided into large performance, individual studio, and office spaces in Erector Square, New Haven's largest rental complex for artists of all kinds.

And this spring, Music Haven graduates its first group of six high school seniors, several of whom have been in the program since its inception.

“Our mission has remained consistent since we started in 2006,” says Mandi Jackson, the program's executive director, “with the idea that a string quartet could teach and live in the community – a different way to be a musician, bringing access to high-quality instruction and live performances to people who otherwise wouldn't have the chance to learn the instruments and hear the music.”

Music Haven serves kids in the city's lowest-income, highest-crime areas (referred to as Promise Zone neighborhoods). The only factor that has really changed over the years, Jackson notes, is the size of the program, and most recently, she says, “rather



Student Jordan Brown with her arm around teacher Yaira Matyakubova



Volunteer Elena Brennan, wearing the headband, and Jane Stewart.

than teaching from school to school, being able to bring everybody together under one roof.

The members of the Haven String Quartet, who teach the students, are Yaira Matyakubova, violin; Annalisa Boerner, viola; Philip Boulanger, cello; and Gregory Tompkins, violin. Speaking for the quartet, Tompkins says they are thrilled to be in the new space.

“There are so many benefits,” he says. “As a teacher, it’s incredibly powerful and important to have your own studio space where you can put whatever you want on the walls and there aren’t the distractions of teaching in the public schools. Now, when kids come in for lessons after school, they have a spot to do homework and get help with homework. And there’s room for families to come listen to the orchestra rehearse and get to know one another. Having this space is about building a community.”

A new program that tunes even more deeply into the community is Music Bridge, a weekly beginner violin class for refugee children from all over the world who live in New Haven.

“It started when the refugee crisis was in the news a couple of years ago,” Jackson says. “The kids were asking Yaira [Matyakubova], who teaches the class, what a refugee was, and asked her if they could go play some music and do a workshop with refugee kids in IRIS’s [Integrated Refugee and Immigrant Services] afterschool program. Music Bridge grew out of that with a grant from the Connecticut Office of the Arts.”

THE WAY IT WORKS

Admission to Music Haven is on a first-come, first-served basis, Jackson explains. The only requirements are that a child is between the ages of 6 and 12 and resides in one of the city’s Promise Zone neighborhoods.

“There’s a simple application, no auditions,” she says, “and we meet with the parents and child and make sure that parents realize how rigorous and demanding the program is. So, it is a little self-selecting.”

Students are provided with musical instruments, the majority of which are donated.



TOP PHOTO: Austin Rivera takes a bass lesson with his teacher, Philip Boulanger, a member of Haven String Quartet.
BOTTOM PHOTO: Teacher and Haven String Quartet member Yaira Matyakubova gives a violin lesson to Claudine Umumuporeze (left) and Noorhan Abdulridha.

“We’ve acquired quite a large inventory over the past 10 years,” Tompkins says. As they grow, students have to move up a size in their instrument more or less every school year.”

To encourage them to continue playing, and because they likely can’t afford to purchase one, students have the opportunity to earn instruments to keep when they leave the program. More than skill, the requirements are based on effort: progress, attendance, teamwork and other factors.

In terms of funding, Jackson says: “We have a small number of public grants, which are harder to secure given the current [Connecticut] budget situation. Fortunately, we have a lot of individuals and small family foundations, mostly from Greater New Haven and also the Shoreline that have supported us over the years, and that’s predominantly how we fund what we do. We also receive a small amount of earned revenue from performances and workshops given by the quartet that goes back into our program.”

A UNIQUE MODEL

Music Haven is the only program of its kind in Connecticut, and although there are similar programs in New England, it is unique in that there isn’t a second tier of part-time teachers – with the exception of Patrick Doane, who directs the Discovery Orchestra; a new three-day-per-week beginner program focusing on fundamentals.

“This is because we’ve felt like it’s really important to invest in our teachers so they don’t have to do 5,000 other things at the same time to [make a living],” Jackson says. “Instead of having a teacher here one hour a week teaching two students, our teachers are full-time. And so everyone gets to know each other over time and teachers develop one-on-one relationships with the kids and families.”

Tompkins finds that his being a teacher and performing musician benefits his students “because they learn so much from watching their teachers play and perform in concerts, and they also realize we make mistakes, too.”

Jackson and Tompkins say what students gain from participating in this program goes far beyond learning to play an instrument.

“The core of my teaching philosophy – it sounds so clichéd – is, ‘You can do anything if you work at it every single day,’ Tompkins says. “If you provide students with that experience of working for something and having a positive result on a regular basis, I think it’s something that really sticks with you. Well-being is so much associated with your ability to have control over your environment, over your life, and if we can teach them how they can have

MUSIC HAVEN WINTER PERFORMANCE LINEUP

Pushing Boundaries: Women Who Compose

March 10, 2018, 7:30 to 9 p.m.
Unitarian Society of New Haven
700 Hartford Turnpike, Hamden

In recognition of Women’s History Month, The Haven String Quartet performs classical selections by women composers, including Aleksandra Vrebalov, Grayna Bacewicz, Fanny Mendelssohn-Hensel and Jennifer Higdon.

Tickets: \$25 general admission; \$10 for students and USNH members.

Studio Recital Week

Students perform in a series of studio recitals with their teachers. The community is invited to attend and stay for a potluck (and bring a dish to share). All concerts are held from 6 to 8 p.m. at Music Haven, Erector Square, 315 Peck St., Bldg. 5, 2nd Fl., New Haven.

March 19: Gregory Tompkins’ and Patrick Doane’s Violin Recital

March 20: Yaira’s Matyakubova’s Violin Recital

March 21: Annalisa Boerner’s Viola Recital

March 22: Philip Boulanger’s Cello Recital

All performances are free and open to public, unless indicated otherwise. For tickets and information, visit www.musichavenct.org or call 203-745-9030.

that power, I think it’s a really important thing.”

Students also learn a lot about teamwork and interdependency.

“They learn to listen to each other in a very deep way and to work out differences of opinion about how something should sound, make a plan for what they want to rehearse next, etc.,” Jackson says.



Yaira Matyakubova teaches Music Bridge, a weekly beginner violin class for refugee children living in New Haven.

STUDENT SUCCESS

Jordan Brown, 16, is a high school junior who has been in the Music Haven program since she was 6 years old. She's a violin student, studying with Tompkins.

Brown says Music Haven has made a huge, positive impact on her, noting she plays "big, complicated stuff now" and attends New Haven's Cooperative Arts Magnet High School, where she majors in instrumental and vocal music and is taking a percussion elective.

She hasn't decided yet if she's going to major in music in college, but says, "I'm most definitely going to college because my family raised me that way. I'm a person who knows everything is planned for a reason: whatever happens, happens. I would like to keep music in my life and believe it will be an important factor in my life in the future."

Asked what she most likes about Music Haven, Brown doesn't hesitate.

"I like the relationships that come out of it," she says. "I like the fact that this is not a school, you're not graded on what you do, but you put a lot of work into it because you want to. All the teachers are great. My teacher is great. I can

talk to him about anything. I have a lot of good friends here. It's one of the most consistent things in my life."

The program has given Brown many unexpected gifts.

"We learn a lot of moral things," she says. "We aren't in school, yet we have teachers that teach us more than they're supposed to. Also, we learn we have to contribute. As older kids, we have a responsibility to teach and mentor the younger kids. We have 'buddy practice' with them after they have lessons with their teachers to boost their learning. It gives us an idea of what the teachers' jobs are like, too."

Brown attributes many of her musical achievements to Music Haven.

"Music Haven has helped me a lot to where I am today, skill-wise on my instrument, like it's become a big part of my family now," she says. "Most of my family sings. Music has been a part of our family for a long time, my brother plays drums in my church. And I get a lot of support based off what I've been learning here.

"My brother is getting married and I get to play at his wedding," Brown adds with a big smile. "If it wasn't for me being here, I wouldn't be doing that. I'm playing, 'Say You Won't Let Go' by James Arthur. I'm really excited." 