

Bridges to college built with music

By DAWN BORMANN

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During an after-school lesson at Eisenhower Middle School in Kansas City, Kan., 13-year-old Branden Taylor practiced the violin under the guidance of Musical Bridges instructor Angela Diaw.

Branden Taylor relied for years on YouTube to get extra violin instruction that his public school and family couldn't afford.

The 13-year-old sat mesmerized watching musicians on video perform intricate pieces. He used his ear alone to recreate works, including Bach's Concerto in A minor. His middle school teachers were blown away and yet distraught that they couldn't give him one-on-one intensive instruction.

They appealed to the Conservatory of Music and Dance at the University of Missouri-Kansas City, which didn't waste time dispatching help.

Now Branden has free private lessons once a week through UMKC's Musical Bridges program.

The lessons have been a blessing for Branden, his family and his teachers, who feared his obvious natural ability would be squandered.

"You can't let that dry up in kids," said Aimee DeSotel, Eisenhower Middle School instrumental music teacher.

Musical Bridges is part of a community outreach effort that UMKC's conservatory has seen yield high results in at-risk children.

For years, conservatory instructors watched as students with amazing raw talent like Branden entered college with so much promise. But all too often children, particularly from urban school districts, failed to blossom once they reached college because they studied alongside students who had taken regular private lessons from childhood.

"We saw a lot of students that were coming to the conservatory who were not ready in basic remedial ways, both academically and musically," said Mara Gibson, director of community music and dance academy at the conservatory.

The students had raw talent, without question. But they had fallen behind elsewhere. Sometimes it was ear training and theory components. Often their ACT scores were low and their practice habits were lacking.

"You can't just cram for this kind of stuff," Gibson said. "It's like an athletic training in a sense. You need to do a little bit every day."

Professors could only watch so long while talented children struggled or dropped out of music programs. The outreach program launched Musical Bridges as a way to help.

Musical Bridges provides free private instruction to exceptionally talented children in three area school districts. If accepted, students must maintain a 3.0 grade point average and practice regularly. Bridges teachers meet children at their school once a week for instruction. Lessons continue through the summer and often include elite summer music camps.

The program is ending its first year in the Kansas City, Kan., School District. It has also been well received in the Hickman Mills and Kansas City districts for a few years.

“Until we started this program, I only knew of one student that took private lessons on their own,” said Rod Young, who teaches orchestra at Ruskin High School. “It allows them to progress farther than I could probably ever take them myself.”

There is no obligation to attend UMKC or study music.

“Our aim is not to make these students musical prodigies. Our aim is to get these kids to college,” Gibson said.

“We’ve had a 100 percent success rate. Every single student that has gone through Musical Bridges has gone on to college.”

Sixteen students have graduated and are attending college, and 22 currently are involved in the program at various schools.

The program is going to save some children’s lives, said Jean Ney, coordinator of fine arts and physical education in the Kansas City, Kan., School District.

Some of the most talented children can get bored and become discipline problems in a one-size-fits-all public school classroom, she said.

“Extremely bright kids will find something to do, and it’s not always productive or legal,” Ney said. “This is creative, productive and beautiful.”

In just one year, she can already see that the program is helping to level the playing field for the district’s children compared with those from more affluent neighborhoods.

“There’s just no substitute for a private instructor,” she said. “The public school teachers are amazing teachers — they’re amazing — but for the Bridges people to be able to do this for our kids is like a dream come true.”

Private funders pay stipends for the Bridges teachers. Some school districts also contribute money, but in Kansas City, Kan., budget woes have meant that the district has struggled just to maintain its fourth-grade strings and middle-school programs. Contributing money was out of the question.

Instead, community leaders such as Valerie Chow are raising money to expand and maintain the program, which costs about \$2,500 per child.

The group is hosting a gala tonight and will accept donations throughout the year.

Chow, an anesthesiologist, said she is compelled to help because as a child she benefited from scholarships and the aid of others. She can hardly turn away knowing that less than 1 percent of Kansas City, Kan., students take private lessons.

The program has been a real blessing to Branden’s family.

Branden’s mother paid for lessons when he was in the fifth grade, but it was a luxury her family simply couldn’t sustain.

“It was like \$25 for 30 minutes. It can get expensive,” said his mother, Lisa Harris. “You want the best for your child and you try to provide, but at a certain point ... it’s a lot.”

For his part, Branden knows he needs more focus.

“He was used to doing things where he works on the whole piece and not just that measure,” said his Bridges instructor, Angela Diaw.

Diaw said she needs him to perfect each measure slowly and methodically rather than play an entire song at once.

Branden concedes the lessons have been challenging — but fun.

“I like that it gives you things to do instead of me just practicing stuff on my own,” he said.

Branden’s teacher at Musical Bridges has high expectations for the young man.

“I want him to reach beyond the stars and be way better than I am,” Diaw said.

“If Branden tightens his guns and has the discipline — because he’s already got the talent — you could hear him anywhere. He’s a seventh-grader. He’s got the whole world right now.”

Concert tonight

The public can listen to students perform at 7 p.m. today at White Recital Hall on the UMKC campus. The concert is free, but donations will be accepted.

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