

Bringing music to Durham's kids

KidZNotes, an after-school program for kindergarten and elementary school kids, is giving new opportunities to inner-city students through music education and performances.



Staff photo by Melanie Johnson

The KidZNotes participants practice singing scales with teacher Jihyun Park. At their after-school program, the students practice singing every Monday and have orchestra rehearsals on Tuesday, Thursday, Friday and Saturday.

By Melanie Johnson

Durham VOICE Staff Writer

While watching a 2008 “60 Minutes” special on El Sistema, a system of youth orchestras created in Venezuela to combat child poverty, Lucia Powe had an idea: “Let’s bring this to Durham.”

Powe was 77 at the time. But that didn’t stop her.

“I turned to my husband and said, ‘Wouldn’t it be nice for someone to start that in East Durham?’” Powe said. “And he said, ‘Well, why don’t you do it?’”

So that’s what she did. Together with Katie Wyatt, a violist who had experienced El Sistema firsthand in Venezuela in 2005, and founding board chair Kathie Morrison, the trio launched KidZNotes in Durham.

KidZNotes is a free after-school program that introduces inner-city chil-

dren to music. The kids attend rehearsals, where they learn music theory, take singing lessons and learn how to play an instrument.

Wyatt said she knew after she met Powe that they could build the program.

“I could bring the expertise of how the program would work, and she would help bring supporters,” Wyatt said. “She helped get the board off the ground and started raining money.”

The Beginning

KidZNotes launched in fall 2010 with 60 students in three elementary schools. The next year the program had expanded to 110 students in five schools. Now in its third year, KidZNotes serves nearly 200 children at Club Boulevard Humanities Magnet School, E.K. Powe Elementary School, Eastway Elementary School, Maureen

Joy Charter School and Y.E. Smith Elementary School.

The KidZNotes program begins in kindergarten, where students become part of the “Mozarts.” They are provided with their own violin and receive 10 hours of after-school instruction each week throughout the school year.

“It’s about developing that habit of learning, where learning doesn’t stop when the bell rings at the end of the day,” Wyatt said.

After their first year in the program, students are able to audition for the upper-level KidZNotes ensemble, the “Beethovens.” At this point, the children can choose the instrument they play. They can continue with the violin or move on to another instrument such as the viola, trumpet, cello, flute, trombone or percussion.

A Full Youth Orchestra

Jennifer Blank, KidZNotes’ development and marketing manager, said the goal is to expand the “Beethovens” to a youth orchestra of 100 students or more. Right now, there are approximately 50 children in the “Beethovens.” The “Beethovens” feature smaller groups within it as well.

“Everybody plays in the Beethoven ensemble, but then we have the string quartet, the Beethoven All-Stars, a jazz combo, and we’re always coming up with new opportunities for the kids to play in small groups to perform in the community,” Blank said.

The kids perform about 50 times per year at various community events, Wyatt said. They performed in celebration of Martin Luther King Jr. Day, at the opening of the N.C. Museum of Natural Sciences in Raleigh and on the Duke University campus quad.

Community Partners

Duke University partners with KidZNotes with an annual grant that helps provide musical instruments to the students. Additionally, Duke University professors visit the KidZNotes students at rehearsals, and the students go to see the university concerts, which makes it an even broader partnership, Wyatt said.

Durham Public Schools partners with KidZNotes on transportation.

Upper-level,

“Beethoven,” stu-

dents are bussed

over to W.G.

Pearson Middle

School to rehearse

after-school four

times during the

week. The lower-

level “Mozart”

students rehearse

at their respective

elementary schools.

On Saturdays, the

two groups come

together for a joint

rehearsal.

“We have great

partnerships with

Duke and DPS,”

Wyatt said. “It’s

very much a private-public

partnership to advance

the goal of making

our city better.

Wyatt and Powe said KidZNotes’

main goal is to help keep kids in school,

bridge the achievement gap and combat the dropout rate and incarceration rate for children in poverty.

“It’s not just cute little kids playing cute little instruments,” Powe said. “It’s working to keep future generations out of prison.”

Wyatt said she believes the program is changing these children for the better.

“What I love most is listening to them talk about the world in a totally different way,” Wyatt said. “Before starting

KidZNotes, they had no idea about going to concert halls or summer festivals. And now they’re talking about summer camp and touring and playing in Carnegie Hall – just having the concept that they could do something like that.”

Big Dreams

Marcus, a fourth-grade student from E.K. Powe Elementary, has been in KidZNotes from the beginning and plays the cello.

“It’s a big instrument that has low sounds, and you can do funny noises on it,” Marcus said.

Marcus said he wants to pursue a career in music – among other things.

“I wanna be a musician, a meteorologist...and a mathematician,” Marcus said.

Katherine, a second grade student from E.K. Powe Elementary, plays the violin and also aspires to play the flute.

“Because it makes pretty noises,” she said.

Katherine wants to be a teacher. She enjoys math and science and said she plans on being a part of the “Beethoven” ensemble for many years to come.



Staff photo by Melanie Johnson
Second-grader Katherine joined KidZNotes last year and plays the violin in the “Beethoven” group.

Looking Forward

Beginning in the fall, KidZNotes plans to launch pilot programs at two inner-city schools in Raleigh. The program in Durham will continue at its five partner schools with new kindergartners joining the “Mozarts” and many kindergartners and first graders advancing into the “Beethovens.”

Wyatt said there are also plans in the works to make

the Holton Career and Resource Center, the KidZNotes’ Saturday rehearsal space, the program’s weekday location.

Additionally, KidZNotes will host a fundraising event, its 3rd Annual KidZNotes Gala. The gala will take place at the Carolina Theatre in Durham on May 1, 2013 at 5:30 p.m. The KidZNotes ensemble will perform, and there will be a silent auction.

Wyatt is confident that there will be continued success for KidZNotes.

“The support base feeds itself,” Wyatt said. “The more you’re around it, the more you want to be a part of it. The wider our reach becomes, and it really does become systemic.”

Powe, too, is hopeful for the program. She shrugs off the many who praise her as the “founder” or “visionary” of KidZNotes, and says it has blossomed in ways she never imagined.

“It’s going so beautifully that I’m running down the street trying to catch up with it!”

KidZNotes Gala

Tickets to the 2013 KidZNotes Gala are available online at: <http://www.kidznotes.org/gala/> or by calling Jennifer Blank at: (919) 560-2712

For more about KidZNotes please visit:

<http://www.kidznotes.org/>
<http://www.dpsnc.net/>
<http://duke.edu/>
<http://elsistemausa.org/>



Staff photo by Melanie Johnson
Fourth-grade KidZNotes student Marcus started off playing the violin and now plays the cello.