

A LESSON IN HARMONY



Students Tisha Sandoval, Nathaly Cruz and Tivil McIntyre learn music skills in Academy Saturday from Kidznotes.

‘Kidznotes’ offers free music lessons to build up communities

Elise Clouser
THE DURHAM VOICE

Within the wide hallways of the Holton Career and Resource Center, musical melodies and rhythms float through the air Saturday morning. In one classroom, a loud, clear choir of children’s voices sings a hymn, “Of the Father’s Love Begotten.” In another room, a trio of young musicians practices “Hot Cross Buns” on eighth-sized violins.

Kidznotes Saturday rehearsal is in session.

The program provides an intense, classical music education to students pre-K through 12th grade in Durham and Raleigh — completely free of charge. The program is based on a Venezuelan model of music education called “El Sistema.”

Inspired by a visit to Venezuela in 2005, Kidznotes executive director Katie Wyatt said she saw the system in action and knew she wanted to bring a similar program back in the U.S. In 2009, Wyatt was selected for a fellowship that allowed her to go back and learn more about the community-building system. Then, in September 2010, Wyatt launched Durham’s Kidznotes with the help of other community-minded musicians.

“This is a system of change,” Wyatt said of Kidznotes and similar programs.

Kidznotes was the first El Sistema program in North Carolina, and among the first 10 in the nation. Today, more than 120 El Sistema-inspired programs nationwide are influencing the lives of thousands of young musicians.

In the first year of Kidznotes, the program partnered with three elementary schools and taught about 60 students. Now entering its seventh year, Kidznotes teaches a total of about 400 students across nine schools in Durham and Raleigh.

Development associate Stephen Pysnik said he’s pleased with the momentum they’ve had so far, and a long-term goal is for Kidznotes to reach every corner of North Carolina. The program is currently looking to expand to Chapel Hill and other cities.

Although the rehearsals, instruments and summer camps are free of charge for the families involved, Kidznotes staff said the commitment is not to be taken lightly. Participants go to rehearsals every Tuesday, Thursday, Friday and Saturday. The program also puts on frequent concerts and showcases throughout the year.

Despite all the hard work, students and their families develop a community in Kidznotes. Students say their best friends are in the program, and they learn valuable life skills beyond just reading music.

Eighth-grade student Jessie Marin has

been involved in Kidznotes for six years. She plays violin in her middle school’s orchestra and hopes to continue playing in high school. She said the program has made her a better musician and leader.

“It’s a small bubble. We’re like a family, and if you expand that bubble, it will be an even bigger family,” Jessie said.

Pysnik, Kidznote’s development associate, said that studies conducted by the Social Science Research Institute at Duke University point to the overwhelming benefit of involving children in music early on.

“Kids feel empowered and connected through the music,” Pysnik said. “They display better behavior and grades, and they become community leaders. They are good students and citizens.”

Kidznotes is testing a pilot program in Durham called Academy Saturdays. Traditional El Sistema programs teach students in an orchestral setting, but this new program is experimenting with giving participants individualized and small-group instruction.

Pysnik and Wyatt hope Academy Saturdays will help students who are falling behind and nurture kids who show exceptional talent.

Because Wyatt is stepping down to pursue another opportunity, Kidznotes is searching for a new executive. For more information on Kidznotes and upcoming events, visit www.kidznotes.org.