

Child's play

In five years, Baton Rouge nonprofit builds largest kids' orchestra in the country

By Sara Bongiorno | Photos by Tim Mueller

Kids' Orchestra, the afterschool program that is transforming children's music-education in Baton Rouge, traces its roots in part to "60 Minutes."

That's what Nanette Noland was watching on a Sunday night five years ago when the CBS program aired a segment on Gustavo Dudamel, the artistic director of the Los Angeles Philharmonic.

Dudamel credits Venezuela's publicly funded El Sistema music-education program for putting a violin in his hands at age 10 and beginning his rise to the global arts stage.

The segment struck a chord with Noland, whose rector at St. James Episcopal Church that morning had called on parishioners to do more to bridge the community's racial divide.

Noland got up the next morning and decided to start something similar in Baton Rouge. "This is about using music to build



teamwork, awareness and standards of excellence," said Noland, who in addition to founding Kids' Orchestra also serves as chair of its board of directors. "I wanted that for children here."

Five years later, Kids' Orchestra is the largest U.S. music program of its kind for children from kindergarten through fifth grade. By comparison, Dudamel's program in L.A., a model for the one here, serves 600 children. A similar El Sistema-inspired program in San Antonio reaches 450 kids.

Twice a week during the school year, nearly 800 children with instruments on loan from Kids' Orchestra gather in classrooms across the parish for instruction in classical instruments or to rehearse for one of the organization's two choirs.

Kids' Orchestra runs two summer camps in addition to three orchestras. It has more than 100 contract employees, including 74 professional musicians who teach the children. The nonprofit with seven full-time employees is the largest employer of music teachers in the community. It provides bus transportation and outfits the children in T-shirts for dozens of public performances across the city, including performances by its 200-member honors orchestra.

A sliding scale determines the cost of participation, as little as \$10 per semester in some cases. Twenty-six private and public schools participate. Lessons are held at 12 sites across the parish.

There are more than 100 children on its waiting list.

"There was nothing here like it five years ago," said Jody Hanet, its executive director. "This fills a void."

That void in large part has to do with music education in public schools. Hanet studied voice at LSU and taught music at schools in Arizona, New Jersey and New York before returning to Baton Rouge after more than 20 years away.

She says music is a bigger part of public education elsewhere. Poor funding and lagging understanding of the positive impact on academic performance, according to Hanet, have hampered public music education in Baton Rouge.

What isn't lacking is talent. "I see more raw talent here than anywhere I've lived; children with talent that gives you goose bumps," she says. "We have children hungry for music, but we haven't fed that."

Responding to longing and another sort of hunger—the real

GIVING OPPORTUNITY

Hanette Noland grants money from her donor advised fund at the Baton Rouge Area Foundation to support Kids' Orchestra. She founded the nonprofit, which is the largest afterschool program of its kind in the nation. To contribute to Kids' Orchestra, call Donor Services at 225.357.6126.

kind—is also a core function of Kids' Orchestra. Its 90-minute sessions start with substantial nutritious snacks provided by Revolution Foods, a nonprofit child-nutrition program out of Metairie.

It offers still-heartier afternoon suppers through a partnership with the East Baton Rouge School District at some participating schools. The reason is simple: Many of the kids would go hungry otherwise.

Homework is another focus.

On a recent Tuesday afternoon at St. James Episcopal School, 43 children from St. James and nearby Dufroq Elementary hunker down over homework sheets and turkey sandwiches and apples as the first order of business.

The atmosphere is cheerfully controlled chaos, but as with the turkey sandwiches and apples there is something larger at work in setting aside time to nourish mind and body.

"Many of our children do not have an adult at home who asks about homework and helps them with it," Hanet says. "We want them to understand that is something that they need to do every day."

Only after the children have eaten and helped to clean up do they divide into smaller groups for 60-minute lessons in percussion, ball, violin, cello, flute and other instruments.

Abundant research shows that music education has a positive impact on academic achievement, including in reading and mathematics. Parents, teachers and principals tell Hanet that Kids' Orchestra produces positive results among local children, including improved attendance and better self-esteem, although academic achievement is not a formal part of its mission.

"That wasn't our focus, but we're seeing that happening," she says.

Hanet wants to bolster those anecdotes with concrete measures. To that end, researchers at the LSU School of Music are developing a case study to track the impact of Kids' Orchestra participating on academic performance and social well-being. Additional ties to the music school include an internship program for graduate students now under development that will begin in the 2016-17 academic year.

Over time, Kids' Orchestra could grow to about 1,200 students, Hanet says.

Expanding the program to additional schools and students is



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—Nanette Noland, founder and chair of Kids' Orchestra

on hold for now, however, to allow the organization to solidify its funding structure and develop a long-term funding mechanism.

Kids' Orchestra currently relies chiefly on grants, donations and foundation support to cover the per-child cost of about \$1,000 a year. Nearly all of the children receive scholarships, with some families paying about \$600 for 28 weeks of music instruction, snacks and other elements of the program.

Noland says her expectations over Kids' Orchestra have been surpassed again and again since she started it five years back. She sees huge benefits for the community, from less juvenile

delinquency to developing “the next Tchaikovsky or maybe Mick Jagger.”

She also says growing understanding of the program's benefits to children will eventually inspire something even bigger than the fast-growing organization, although she doesn't know what that might be.

“I do know this is something that can raise awareness of so many kinds, starting with awareness of each other among the children,” Noland says. “You come and see the children and you can see for yourself that that's the case.” •