

## Mourning and Honoring a Student Leader

Hermes Camacho, Program Manager, Austin Soundwaves, Austin, TX

The hours, days, and weeks following the death of Draylen Mason at the hands of a serial bomber in March of 2018 are difficult to look back upon. To lose any student is indescribably tragic, but losing Dray was a deep and personal anguish to all of us at Austin Soundwaves (ASW); he was, and continues to be, the heart and soul of our El Sistema-inspired program. In mourning, we learned how much we at ASW depend on our students, sometimes leaning on them just as much as (or more than) they lean on us. Their strength was remarkable during that time, and the energy that typically fuels teenage intransigence was instead diverted two-fold into leading music-making and creating remembrances for Dray. We grieved and didn't simply move on. And though it would have been easy to focus on the perniciousness of the circumstances, we felt a grave and humbling responsibility to persist in recognizing and commemorating Draylen's growing legacy.

Dray was part of many organizations in Austin, and the city's arts community rallied in the most beautiful way possible. The first idea revolved around some sort of scholarship in Draylen's name, but there was a shared feeling that a scholarship was not nearly enough. Draylen was an accomplished and talented musician, and also a true social justice warrior. As an 8th grader, he won an essay contest on racial profiling. His friends and teachers are unanimous in saying Dray lived honorably each day. He spoke up when it was right, and especially when speaking up was difficult. It seemed only fitting that a memorial to Draylen embody both of his passions. Thus was born the Draylen Mason Fellows Program (DMFP).

The DMFP is a year-long, audition- and interview-based initiative for high school-aged musicians from around the greater Austin area to collaborate on an original capstone concert, showcasing their artistic skills by addressing social issues meaningful to their community. As many as twenty sessions, each lasting between two and three hours, take place outside of school hours, and the expectation is that fellows communicate and coordinate with each other regularly. All the sessions are challenging; often, they are very emotional. Our students find out a lot about themselves and their cohort members in a short amount of time. Staff and guest artists initially take the lead in facilitating, but like most of our programming at ASW, we shift to providing guidance and support

as the fellows take over leadership incrementally throughout the year.

Much of what we do with DMFP centers around intentional social action. Our regular Austin Soundwaves programming—orchestra, band, chamber music, mariachi, private lessons and so on—is intentional social action. But we, the teaching artists and program staff, act as the social change agents,



Draylen Mason, before he left for the Take A Stand Festival in 2016. Photo: Austin Soundwaves.

working and collaborating within artistically underserved communities. DMFP differs in that it puts the fellows (students) in the position of driving social change, requiring them to consider the social implications of their music-making through both an awareness and intentionality in their artistic choices. The challenge is making these connections seamless, so we spend a significant amount of time helping the fellows discover who they are as artists and what is deeply meaningful to them. It is common (and

heartening) for musicians to say they want to make a difference with their music-making, but perhaps less common for them to be specific about whom they might benefit. As Draylen did with himself, we push the fellows to dig deeper, to find something uniquely meaningful and perhaps to find one or more issues they either didn't realize were important to them or didn't know existed.

In our first year of the fellowship, we tackled topics ranging from immigration to the criminal justice system as it pertains to people of color. However, we found that our fellows felt most strongly about the stereotypes surrounding them as artists, based on their backgrounds, and wondered whether anyone would take the time to truly listen to their artistry. For example, our fellows recreated Joshua Bell's subway violinist experiment. Moving throughout the performance space, each playing a short solo, they asked the audience, "Would you wade into the music or hurry off because you have somewhere else to go?"

Now, halfway through our second year, our nine fellows have been working with guest artists to develop their personal artists' statements; working collaboratively on original songs; and preparing to dive into discussions about topics of their choosing, which this year include climate change and ageism.

We hope for and dream of a world filled with Draylen Fellows: making music and making change in the world, and just maybe helping to make the difference Dray would have made on his own.

## EDITORIAL

Karen Zorn, President, Longy School of Music of Bard College, Cambridge, MA

At the start of every New Year, I look for inspiration, and this week I found it. "It (Still) Takes a Village," Krystle Ford's article also in this issue, reports on the work of the Indianapolis Symphony's Metropolitan Youth Orchestra, which seeks to engage multiple generations of family members in its El Sistema work.

Her account reminded me of my initial introduction to El Sistema and its leaders. While my new Venezuelan colleagues were excited about the possibilities of El Sistema in North America, they also had a concern: would our culture take to an idea that valued ensembles over soloists and that worked to ensure a place for everyone rather than elevating the highest achievers?

I must confess, I shared their concern. I can't speak for Canadians, but I know that Americans aren't known for their collectivism. The American Dream is about an individual getting ahead rather than a supportive community bringing everyone along. Sometimes it seems we even measure success by how many people we've left behind. I wasn't sure whether El Sistema would translate to such a culture.

In the years since I first heard those questions voiced, I've come to strongly believe that, yes, North America is in fact fertile ground for El Sistema to take root and grow. During my time at Longy, since 2007, I've come to know a new generation of musicians who are as dedicated to social engagement as they are to musical excellence. I've visited núcleos in the United States where the ensemble philosophy is already tangibly transforming lives and changing communities. I've experienced so many incredibly dedicated individuals and organizations who are successfully translating the tenets of this Venezuelan institution into North American communities and are beginning to find ways to connect and support each other in this work.

My hope for 2020 is that though we are all geographically far-flung and continually in the trenches, we can renew our collective inspiration to strengthen these relationships and connections—that we continue to build the nationwide village we need to raise and nurture our emerging new generation of citizen artists.

Happy New Year!

*Karen Zorn*

"In every neighborhood, all across our country, there are good people insisting on a good start for the young, and doing something about it." - Mr. Rogers

## News Notes

This month marks the launch of the first El Sistema program in the country specifically dedicated to [young people impacted by the immigration crisis](#) at the southern border. The pilot program, in the border town of Tornillo, Texas, will be administered by [Tocando](#), the El Paso Symphony Orchestra's El Sistema-inspired program, and the Tornillo public school district. Children living with the acute stresses of displacement and immigration will participate in immersive music learning both during and after school. The pilot is funded by NAMM, the Leonard Bernstein Foundation, and private donations—including one from [El Sistema Greece](#) in solidarity for serving immigrant children worldwide. The U.S. El Sistema community can support this initiative by offering supplies, visits from experienced teaching artists, or by [making contributions](#). Contact: [alejandro@tocandomusicproject.org](mailto:alejandro@tocandomusicproject.org).

[Applications are now open](#) for the [YOLA National Festival](#). The 2020 Festival will feature a Symphony Orchestra and Chamber Orchestra, which now expands to woodwind, brass, and percussion musicians age 12-14. Application deadline is February 3, 2020. [Click here for more information on audition requirements](#).

The [Amplifying Voices](#) program seeks to increase the support and promotion for composers of color, make space at the table for them in artistic planning and decision making at major national orchestras, and make major strides toward transforming the classical canon to include an equitable representation of works by composers of color. The [Sphinx Organization](#) has chosen [New Music USA's](#) Amplifying Voices program as a 2020 Sphinx Venture Fund Recipient. [Read more here](#).

On December 5, 2019, the organization [Creative Generation](#) announced the first ten projects to be included in the Gen C Incubator. [The Gen C Incubator boosts the work of young professionals](#) who are dedicated to building creative capacity in young people to help them serve as creative community developers. The Incubator taps the expertise of artists, educators, and community leaders around the globe to support a pilot cohort of ten selected projects proposed by young professionals and organizations, a cohort that includes an Arts Management Exchange, Innovation Collaborative, and Leadership Network for Arts Education & Special Needs. [Check out the full list of projects and read more here](#).

## Resources

The [Jubilation Foundation](#) seeks the joyful side of human nature for a whole and healthy world. They believe that "music and movement, wherever and however they happen, promote well-being in the individual and the community." They provide two-year grants to U.S. teaching artist Fellows (\$5,000 a year, for two years) "who serve as a link to a world filled with more joy." Maybe you? [Click here to find out more](#). The application deadline is January 15.

The 2020 [Aim High grant competition](#) is now open. Issued through the [Afterschool Alliance](#) and the New York Life Foundation, the Aim High grant supports out-of-school programs that serve US middle schoolers. Aim High helps economically disadvantaged eighth graders succeed in high school by supporting afterschool, summer, and expanded learning programs. Click to learn more about the [grant guidelines](#), [sign up for a live webinar](#), or submit an [online grant proposal](#). Applications are due by January 24, 2020.

[Does your program work with an inspired K-12 teacher](#) (or teacher team) who desires to find ways of forming a deeper connection with your program? If so, share this fellowship opportunity with them. The [Fund for Teachers](#) awards individual fellowships (up to \$5,000) and team fellowships (up to \$10,000) for teachers to immerse themselves more deeply in fields of study that relate to their teaching. The application deadline is January 30, 2020.

We have all read reports affirming that communities, friends and supportive adults are essential to [heal kids who are the victims of bullying](#). El Sistema programs are excellent at providing both kinds of remedies. [New research](#) from the University of Missouri shows that those who feel connected to peers who share their interests, and whose families have stronger home-school (or El Sistema program) connection have much lower bullying frequencies.

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## It (Still) Takes a Village

*Krystle Ford, Director, Metropolitan Youth Orchestra, Indianapolis, IN*

What does it mean to teach with a village mentality? This is what we do every day at the Metropolitan Youth Orchestra (MYO). Families learning alongside one another is at the core of our program.

For the most part, our program operates like a typical youth orchestra program—orchestra rehearsals, weekly private or group lessons, final concerts, and recitals. What's unusual about us has to do with our approach to parent engagement, student empowerment and creating our village.

At MYO, we require every student's parent or guardian to learn an instrument and practice alongside our beginning students for at least three years. Parents are loaned instruments free of charge and are encouraged to continue to participate for as long as possible. Often, the children surpass their family members in playing ability, and typically parents will ask their children for help. How often does a child get to teach an adult? This is one way our students are empowered and confidence is built. They can see their parents in a different light—as human beings who are not perfect and who struggle with learning new things, just as they do. Everyone takes chances, and this opportunity allows the children to see a more vulnerable side to their parents than usual.

Parents who no longer play an instrument stay engaged through a parent group, which has taken the initiative to host a monthly breakfast, discussing topics in Edmund Sprunger's book [Helping Parents Practice](#). Our families also organize clothing swaps and dine-to-donate fundraisers for MYO.

Our village also includes our older MYO students, who serve in a variety of capacities. They peer mentor, assist with tuning, do office tasks, and play next to younger students in rehearsals and performances. In addition, we sometimes have staff members from the [Indianapolis Symphony Orchestra](#) play alongside families at the concerts!

This little village that we have built has strengthened families, and it demonstrates how the arts can bridge gaps and build communities. We help kids navigate their achievements and the challenges of growing up by providing a safety net and loving environment where they can make mistakes, overcome fears, develop healthy relationships, fulfill their potential and use the life skills learned through music to become successful adults.

## Action for the Month: [Speak Out Against Harmful Changes to the SNAP Program](#)

*In December, the USDA changed regulations, now making it more difficult or impossible for 700,000 Americans to obtain the food stamps they depend upon. This directly impacts many El Sistema program families and communities, leading to hungry students, struggling harder to perform in school and music programs. Share concerns about your students with the USDA's SNAP Benefit Division at [SNAPCPBRules@usda.gov](mailto:SNAPCPBRules@usda.gov) or by mail at SNAP Program Development Division, Food and Nutrition Service, US Department of Agriculture, 3101 Park Center Drive, Room 812, Alexandria, Virginia 22302. [Learn more and find a sample letter here](#).*