

## The Importance of Mission Statements

Myka Miller, MM, MBA; Chief Executive Officer, *Harmony Project*, Los Angeles, CA; Board Member, *El Sistema USA*

How do you describe your program to funders? What stories do you tell, and how do they affect your students? These were some of the questions explored in a session called “How We Talk about Our Programs: The Stories We Tell Ourselves,” that I facilitated alongside Dr. Tia Harvey of *Accent Pontiac* at the El Sistema USA Symposium in January 2020.

Some background: The Harmony Project was founded as a public health intervention in 2001. Since 2007, the year I started with Harmony, we’ve developed many cost-sharing partnerships with organizations ranging from entire school districts and the Los Angeles Philharmonic to after-school providers, mental health providers, local universities, and the Sheriff’s Department Youth Activities League. Today we serve 3,500 students in 16 communities across Los Angeles and Orange County. We have also been expanding nationally since 2011 through affiliations with programs in other cities.

Our original mission was to promote the healthy growth and development of children and build healthier communities through music. However, we found it harder and harder to quantify “healthy,” and identify evidence that we were achieving it. In order to appeal to donors and foundations in a saturated philanthropic market, we often bolstered our mission by emphasizing the negative experiences our students face, by “othering” or labeling them. I felt increasingly uncomfortable as I listened to our founder and some board members talk about our students. After one fundraising event, a student said to me, “I never knew I was poor until today.”

Since 2008, when we began a college scholarship fund, we’ve awarded over 400 college scholarships, and at every fundraising event, we feature alumni speakers. As they tell their stories, I am always moved by their resilience, commitment, and strength.

Why, then, have we felt that to appeal to our donors we had to play up the violence, underachievement, and low graduation rates in their neighborhoods? Did we really have to use deficit-based language about our students—“under”-served, “under”-privileged, at-“risk”? When we buy into that language, we are complicit in the narratives it is our job to change.

By August 2019, we knew our mission statement had to change. Instead of stating what we thought donors needed to hear, we decided to focus on five key elements. I offer them here in the hope that they may be useful to others who are seeking similar change.



*Harmony Project graduation, 2019.*

**1. A measurable goal.** This should be concrete and measurable. For us, this goal is high school graduation and matriculation into postsecondary education. We know that higher education, while not for everyone, is a good proxy for success in life.

**2. A clearly articulated problem to be solved.** This problem should not be attributed to the students or their communities themselves, but to systemic barriers society has created for them. For example: Only 22% of students from low-income communities earn a postsecondary degree, compared to 67% of their peers from high-income areas.

**3. A competitive differentiating diagnosis.** Identify the complex systemic barriers to achievement and propose an ecosystem that would support overcoming them.

**4. A unique solution to the problem.** What is our solution to this identified problem? For Harmony, it’s not just about teaching music, but also offering academic and social support.

**5. Evidence of the impact/results.** We all know how hard it is to quantify our success as teaching artists. What are your indicators? For us, the important indicator is that 98% of Harmony Project high school seniors have graduated and gone to college.

Working from these five key elements, here’s what we came up with: **Harmony Project harnesses the transformative power of music to increase access to higher education for students from historically disadvantaged communities, by removing systemic barriers to achievement through academic and social support.**

Yes, it’s a mouthful. And yes, there were compromises made. But we can all agree on it.

And it could not have been timelier. Rampant police brutality, seen through the stark lens of a global pandemic, is now bringing the Black Lives Matter movement to the forefront. While many organizations “check the boxes” for diversity, equity, and inclusion, we all need to ask: What are our actions saying? How many of our staff and teaching artists reflect the communities we serve? What actionable commitment is our organization making to anti-racism and social justice?

Finally: Is the language we use empowering to our students? It’s a truism that actions speak louder than words—but we are learning from our students that words are a form of action, as well.

## EDITORIAL

Monique Van Willingham, Director, *Master of Arts in Teaching (MAT) Program*, Longy School of Music, Los Angeles, CA

I had my first U.S. protest experience in Los Angeles, CA, after the murder of Michael Brown, Jr. I could hear but not see the protesters behind rows of policemen in riot gear. As circling helicopters kept me awake that night, I realized that I felt safer in my home country of South Africa, although I had directly experienced racism, gender-based violence, and crime there.

A similar feeling arose after George Floyd’s murder. My fear was not for the city or its businesses—just a sense of terror on behalf of the protestors. Using city-wide lockdowns to kill protests echoed the South African apartheid regime’s response over 20 years ago.

In these last few weeks, I have experienced cycles of shock, anger, depression, dialogue, and hope alongside my students. Our youth are growing up in an ecosystem where police brutality is commonplace, inhumane immigration practices continue, and LGBTQI+ rights are still withheld. In the music for social change field, where leaders and teaching artists are predominantly white, 83% of our students are students of color—26% are Black and 41% are Latinx. What is El Sistema’s role in this landscape?

We will answer this question with our action (or inaction) moving forward. We are either working to dismantle racist practices or we are not. If we cannot own and reflect on the complicit nature of our privilege, then we have no business doing this work. It is easy to say the right thing, but challenging to truly listen, admit, and understand. And even more painful to forgive, continuing to care for others patiently as their privilege is unraveled.

Nelson Mandela said that “courage [is] not the absence of fear, but the triumph over it.” It is with this sentiment pounding in my chest that I choose to act: to speak out, critically inquire, collaborate; to say “yes” and to say “no.” To tell my story. This takes courage; but through our vulnerabilities, we begin reframing the notion of professionalism to incorporate empathy, listening, and the space for our full selves.

Start here: Choose to embody courage. Tell your story. Create spaces where students can do the same. Trust the voices of our youth and communities of color. Our field is already poised to embody racial healing—let’s not waste this opportunity. It is in the vulnerability of our stories that authentic solidarity and hope will arise and show us the way forward. Courage is a choice. Action is a choice. And hope is a choice.

*Monique Van Willingham*

“Music is your own experience, your own thoughts, your wisdom. If you don’t live it, it won’t come out of your horn. They teach you there’s a boundary line to music. But, man, there’s no boundary line to art.” ~ Charlie Parker

## News Notes

**YOLA National at Home**, this year's online version of the annual YOLA National Festival and Symposium, offers keynotes (Thomas Wilkins and Gustavo Dudamel), community and artist conversations, teaching tools, and project-based learning opportunities for youth and adults. Students, educators, and artists are invited into these interactive experiences, held 3–4 times per week over Zoom and YouTube Live from July 10–31. Register for updates [here](#). YOLA is also partnering with [Project 440](#) to provide musicians of the YOLA National Festival Orchestras with a six-week virtual program on using art as a vehicle for positive change and how to prepare for college or conservatory.

The Lewis Prize for Music announced the recipients of its \$1.25 million [COVID-19 Community Response Fund](#), awarded to 32 Creative Youth Development (CYD) organizations across the U.S. (including three El Sistema organizations) that have [adapted and responded to serve the needs of young people and their families during the pandemic](#). One-third of recipients have budgets of less than \$100,000 per year; two-thirds are led by people of color. Read an article about the Fund in the [July World Ensemble](#).

You can watch the [Association of Teaching Artists Awards celebration live online](#) on [Thursday, July 23 at 7:00 p.m. EDT](#). The [Teaching Artist Ally Award](#) goes to Dennie Palmer Wolf of [WolfBrown](#) for her years of advocacy, collaboration, and research (including the first study on U.S. Sistema programs) supporting teaching artists. The [Distinguished Service to the Field Award](#) goes to [Nai-Ni Chen](#) for her 20-plus years of dance teaching artistry. The [Innovation in Teaching Artistry Award](#) goes to Kwame Scruggs, founder and director of [Alchemy](#) in Akron, OH, which works with adolescent males through the telling, discussion, and interpretation of mythological stories along with the beat of an African drum.

In an open letter to its community, Price Hill Will/MYCincinnati recognizes that “everything about an organization’s [practices, beliefs, culture, structure, and programs either contributes to racial equity or opposes it](#).” They present a [detailed overview of their equity statements](#), programs and initiatives, hiring and compensation practices, trainings, fundraising, and more, inviting feedback. Also, their annual Price Hill Creative Community Festival (July 20–25) has announced the festival’s transition to online along with the three Artists-in-Residence. Learn more [here](#).

## Resources

The National Guild for Community Arts Education

has created a [National Youth Network \(NYN\) Meeting](#) as part of the Creative Youth Development (CYD) movement. [Youth practitioners, teaching artists, and culture workers age 13–24](#) are encouraged to attend this weekly virtual gathering and connect, share, and express themselves creatively. Meetings take place every Friday from 7–8:30 p.m. EDT; for more information, please contact [Paula Ortega](#) (youth leader) or [Ashley Hare](#) (adult accomplice).

[Decolonizing the Music Room](#) is a non-profit organization aiming to use research, training, and discourse to [help music educators center the voices and experiences of Black, Brown, and Indigenous people](#) to challenge European and White American practices. Resources include suggested reading, podcasts, firsthand accounts from other music educators, video blogs, and more. Join this ongoing process of learning, reflection, and growth.

The [Cultural Equity Learning Community \(CELC\)](#) is open to [arts leaders committed to building racial equity and justice](#) in the arts. Geared toward white-identifying arts leaders and/or those working in predominately white institutions, the two-unit online course offers a go-at-your-own pace learning path with complementary wraparound learning supports. The course seeks to reduce harm toward BIPOC leaders in the arts and culture sector, increase skill sets and accountability of white arts sector leaders, examine what it means to build anti-racist co-conspiratorship, and more.

Many music for social change organizations want to [respond to racial justice demands in every way they can](#), and engaging their Boards is a common strategy. A good, free, two-part webinar series from [Nonprofit Quarterly](#) shares effective ways to involve your Board: “Beyond the Board Statement: How Can Boards Join the Movement for Racial Justice?” See [Part 1 here](#) and [Part 2 here](#).

If your program is [rethinking its fundraising strategies](#) in this new economic landscape, you may want to consult the experts: The Chronicle of Philanthropy (the major publication for the field) recently published a [Tool Kit](#) for fundraising during the pandemic.

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## An Open Letter to My Students

*Joseph Conyers, Assistant Principal Bass, Philadelphia Orchestra; Music Director, Philadelphia All City Orchestra; Executive Director, Project 440*

As an educator, I am a role model for young people. In the wake of the social unrest following the death of George Floyd, my students made it clear: not only did they want me to amplify their voices, but they implored me to amplify my own as well. Below is an abridged version of an open letter I wrote them immediately following our discussion. The complete letter can be found at [project440.org](http://project440.org).

### Dear Students,

I’ve never been a fan of using social media to “make statements.” My statements are lived daily; action is how I respond to adversity. That said, I’m not blind to what’s going on in our country, nor am I surprised by it. It’s why I write you now.

As a Black man, I’ve had my share of experiences that have upset me and a few that have scared me. When faced with challenges, there are many ways one might respond. I’m certainly not going to tell you how you should feel or how you should react. We all grieve in different ways.

I’ve been actively protesting for years. The sign I carry is the color of my skin, and my message to the world has been my advocacy for you.

We want the world to be perfect. It isn’t. We want the world to be full of love; sometimes all we might see is hate. But stand firm.

To my black students, don’t be discouraged. Our ancestors survived the un-survivable, and their blood runs through our veins. Let your light shine as a daily reminder to all. Our lives do matter.

Let music be your inspiration. Bring your authentic, unabashed selves to the concert hall. Music-making is a celebration of our shared experiences. You have a place on that stage. Claim your spot; own it.

You can’t make others love you, but you can inspire them with how you love others. Provide pathways for those who can’t forge a path of their own. Advocate for each other. Be a good person.

When feeling powerless to make change in the world, start by sowing your own seeds of goodness for the future.

You can make a difference.

Love,

Mr. Conyers

## Action for the Month: Support Call for Greater Access to Music Education for Black Students

*Senators Kamala D. Harris (D-CA) and Cory Booker (D-NJ) have introduced a resolution honoring the contributions of African Americans to America’s musical heritage by designating June as African American Music Appreciation Month. The resolution also calls for greater access to music education for African American students, acknowledging that “students of color face many barriers to accessing music education and training.” Please write your senators strongly urging them to support this resolution, which is supported by numerous organizations, including El Sistema USA. Read the full resolution [here](#), and use [this site](#) to learn how to contact your senator.*